

A DIFF BREWSTER MYSTERY ADVENTURE

Mystery of the Mexican Treasure



By ANDY ADAMS

MYSTERY OF THE MEXICAN TREASURE
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No. 4 in the Biff Brewster Mystery Adventure series

From the dust jacket:

Where there is adventure, generally there is danger! Biff Brewster has had enough of both to know this well - but in spite of his thrilling experiences in Brazil, Hawaii, and China, he is hardly prepared for the treachery and intrigue awaiting him in Mexico.

Biff's father has been called to Mexico to act as consultant to a group of archeologists who are searching for what may prove to be one of the most fabulous treasure-houses of Aztec antiquities uncovered to date. But a weird and shocking telephone call brings early warning to the Brewsters: trouble ahead!

More than once, Biff and his friend Miguel must pit courage and ingenuity against possible disaster. A talking statue, a legendary war god, a rare fire opal, a dagger, and a mask - all become forces of destruction which threaten the lives of everyone involved in the hazardous excavation. Obviously, someone else is in search of the treasure, someone who will stop at nothing to claim it for his own evil purpose.

Excitement, suspense, and swift-paced action in authentic foreign settings have made the Biff Brewster Mystery Adventures one of the most popular new series for boys today. *Mystery of the Mexican Treasure* is sure-fire entertainment that will make young readers want to share in all Biff's travels.

The Biff Brewster series

1. Brazilian Gold Mine Mystery, 1960
2. Mystery of the Chinese Ring, 1960
3. Hawaiian Sea Hunt Mystery, 1960
4. Mystery of the Mexican Treasure, 1961
5. African Ivory Mystery, 1961
6. Alaska Ghost Glacier Mystery, 1961
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By ANDY ADAMS

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Mystery of the Mexican Treasure

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CHAPTER I

A Strange Warning

It was evening in Mexico City. From the window of his room in the Hotel Del Monte, Biff Brewster studied the thousands of lights that sparkled in the darkness. Beyond, Biff could see the glow of the downtown district, while rows of tiny, crawling headlights told that traffic was heavy along the city's principal boulevard, the Paseo de la Reforma.

Biff was waiting for his father, Thomas Brewster, to phone from the International Airport, where his plane was about due. Nearly two weeks ago, Mrs. Brewster, sixteen-year-old Biff, and the eleven-year-old twins, Ted and Monica, had started by car from their home in Indianapolis, Indiana, bound for Mexico City, where Mr. Brewster was to join them.

They had been here a few days now, and this evening, Mrs. Brewster had taken the twins to an early movie, leaving Biff at the hotel. Biff had finished dinner and come up to his room only ten minutes ago. He had timed it rather well, for while he was still gazing at the fascinating brilliance of the city, the telephone began ringing in the other room.

Rapidly, Biff found his way there in the dark, picked up the phone and gave a prompt "Hello," expecting to hear his father's voice.

Instead, a smooth, purring tone responded. The words were in excellent English, but with a slight Spanish accent:

"Good evening. This is the apartment of Senor Thomas Brewster?"

"Yes," returned Biff, "but he hasn't arrived here yet--"

"That I know," interrupted the speaker. "You are his son Biff?"

The caller pronounced the nickname slightly like "Beef," which brought a smile from Biff. Then the smile faded. From what the speaker said, something might have happened to Biff's father. Anxiously, Biff began:

"Yes, I'm Biff Brewster--"

"And I am Jose Ramonez," put in the speaker. "Secretary to Judge Felix Arista. Your father is at the airport and is coming directly to Judge Arista's home. He asked me to call you and tell you to meet him there."

Biff had never heard of Judge Arista, but he knew that his father was coming to Mexico City for an important conference. Apparently, the business was more urgent than Mr. Brewster had supposed.

"I will give you the directions," continued Ramonez. "Take them down carefully, so there will be no mistake."

Biff listed and repeated the directions, which were chiefly in terms of *avenidas*-avenues, and *calles*- streets, which would bring him to his destination. Ramonez purred approvingly:

“Very good. Give them to a cab driver outside of your hotel, and he will bring you here.”

As Biff hung up, his blue eyes narrowed with a puzzled gaze. Just beyond the telephone was an object that he had not noticed until this moment. It looked like a glass paper weight, until he picked it up and examined it more closely.

Then Biff was sure that it was rock crystal and probably quite valuable, for it was very finely carved. Its shape, however, was somewhat sinister. It was carved in the exact form of a human skull, but in miniature!

While he studied the odd object, Biff’s smile returned. His mother must have bought the crystal skull while shopping for curios earlier that day. She always looked for unusual gem stones or other minerals that she felt would interest Biff’s father, who was a mining engineer. Biff, too, had a good knowledge of minerals, which was why he had recognized the rock crystal for what it was.

So Biff simply wrote a short note telling his mother where he had gone and why. He weighted it with the tiny skull and left the desk lamp lighted so that Mrs. Brewster would be sure to see the message on her return. Biff then went out to the hallway, locked the door behind him, and started down the stairs to the lobby, only to halt at the last moment.

A faint ringing had reached his ears, and it sounded like the telephone in the Brewster suite. Biff raced back, heard a louder ringing as he opened the door and was just in time to reach the phone before it cut off. He was sure that this call was from his father, but Biff’s breathless “Hello” brought only silence, as though the line had gone dead.

Then, as Biff jiggled the hook to call the switchboard, a slow voice spoke in a strange language, its words carrying a hollow echo. All that Biff could catch was a repeated name that sounded like “Tick Tock,” but all was meaningless until the finish. Then, after a momentary pause, the hollow tone announced:

“Tick Tock-*Muerte-Guardese!*”

Those last words were in Spanish, and Biff understood them plainly. One was “Death,” and the other meant “Beware!” Coupled with the name, they were either a warning or a threat. From the tone, Biff felt it must be a threat. Again, he jiggled the hook, still with no result, so he gave up and went down to the lobby.

There, he found a clerk who merely shrugged his shoulders when Biff asked him about the mysterious call.

“In the last half hour,” the clerk said, “I have two calls-maybe three-asking for your apartment. So I put them through, that was all.”

“And were the voices alike?”

“Maybe a little different,” returned the clerk. “I do not listen on the switchboard, Senor, so I would not know.”

Outside the hotel, a cab moved up as Biff appeared there, the driver pointing to a sign on the windshield which said *Libre*, meaning that the cab was vacant. Biff stepped into the cab and read the direction sheet to the driver, who kept nodding and saying, “Si, Senor,” and started off before Biff was half through.

Soon they were rolling along the Paseo de la Reforma and from there they swung into the Avenida Insurgentes. Biff wasn’t giving further attention to his directions until he saw the brilliantly lighted front of a broad, blocky building that he recognized as the Buenavista Station, the main terminal of the National Railways of Mexico.

Biff knew little of Mexico City, but he was sure that they had gone past the proper turnoff, and he told the driver so in his best Spanish. At first the cabby didn’t seem to understand, but when Biff thrust the list itself in front of him, he halted the cab and poured out a string of verbal apologies.

It was all his mistake, he admitted, and he only hoped that his passenger would not report him. He would take care of the difference in the meter and would find a short way to the place where Biff was going. “*Toto va bien, Senor*” the driver kept insisting, meaning that all would be well.

The cab zigzagged through a maze of streets. Biff kept looking back, wondering just where they were. Every time he did so, he noticed another cab taking the same turn. His cab was being followed!

By the time Biff realized it, his cab had stopped halfway down a darkened street. There, the driver announced in a single word, “*Estamos!*” meaning “Here we are.” Biff paid his fare in peso bills and stepped out of the cab, which promptly sped away. When Biff looked back, he saw no sign of the other cab. Evidently it had gone on past the corner. But he was sure that he could see a furtive figure moving down this very street, against the dull white wall on the opposite side!

Biff turned about to look at the house where the cab driver had left him. Since this was the home of a judge, Biff expected to see something very grand indeed. Instead, he was confronted by a wall as plain as the one across the street, where the shadowy shape from the corner was moving closer every moment. Biff suddenly felt that he was trapped.

The boy’s thoughts went back to that first phone call from the smooth-voiced man who called himself Jose Ramonez and had talked him into coming here. He remembered how he had smiled away the

finding of the crystal skull. Even the sinister voice that had spoken the words, "Death-Beware!" in a hollow tone, was something that Biff had foolishly disregarded.

Unquestionably, the cab driver had dropped Biff off in some obscure section of Mexico City, where anything might happen. The only gap in the long wall was a narrow archway, where Biff edged hopefully, only to find it blocked by a solid iron door.

There Biff turned to watch for the creeping figure across the street. As he did, his elbow nudged something that felt like a push button in the side of the doorway. Biff tried it again; it *was* a push button, for this time he could hear a responding ring beyond the wall. Seconds later, the door opened inward, and Biff was confronted by a uniformed servant, who studied him for a moment and then announced in Spanish:

"Judge Arista is waiting to receive you. Come this way, please."

As Biff passed the bowing servant, he took a quick look back across his shoulder. The light from an inner courtyard threw a broad glow through the open doorway to *the* sidewalk on the opposite side of the narrow street. Biff hoped to catch at least a parting glimpse of the man who had stalked him almost to the doorway.

But the shaft of light showed only a blank wall across the street. The man from the dark was gone.

CHAPTER II

From Legend to Life

THE servant closed the door, bolted it, and led Biff across the courtyard toward a huge, white-walled building that was surrounded by great gardens of rare plants, where narrow, well-paved walks curved off into the darkness. The vast mansion occupied the center of a space the size of a city block, but it was only two stories in height, except for its square corners, which rose like watch towers, a full floor higher.

There, even in the darkness, Biff could make out the projecting edges of a heavily tiled roof that was probably very colorful in the daylight. Totally hidden by the great wall that surrounded it, this house, a reminder of the Spanish Colonial days of old Mexico, was now the residence of Judge Felix Arista.

Biff and the servant entered the house through a broad but low-roofed doorway and came to a hallway that led directly into a lighted patio, where Biff began to recognize the true magnificence of the mansion. A square within a square, the patio was paved with tiny tiles that formed elaborate designs, and in the exact center was a sparkling fountain, skirted by beds of brilliant flowers.

On all sides were slender marble pillars, supporting the second floor that jutted above the paved walk that ran behind the pillars themselves. Lights from casement windows on the upper story were reflected by the fountain, accounting for its changing sparkle as Biff and his guide crossed the patio and entered another door beyond the columns on the opposite side.

There, they came to a reception room lighted by a great crystal chandelier and furnished with gilded chairs and tables. These were matched by the decorations on the walls and on the bars of half a dozen rounded cages, each containing a tropical bird with brilliant plumage.

The servant bowed Biff to a chair and went to inform Judge Arista that his visitor had arrived. While Biff waited, he again reflected on the things that had happened tonight, and began to wonder how they concerned his father.

As chief field engineer for the Ajax Mining Corporation, Thomas Brewster had visited many strange and dangerous places. Always, adventure had been waiting there, as Biff himself could testify, having been along on some of those trips. But Mr. Brewster could hardly have expected that another such adventure would begin in a great metropolis like Mexico City, or he would not have sent his entire

family ahead without due warning.

Something must have developed in the meantime, Biff decided, and his father was probably unaware of it. The question now was whether Biff should mention any of this to Judge Arista or wait until he could talk to his father. Biff decided to wait. After all, he had never met Judge Arista, in fact had never heard of him, until Ramonez, the judge's smooth-spoken secretary, had talked Biff into taking a taxi ride that had almost ended in a trap.

It might still be a trap. The cordial reception given to Biff might be a scheme to lull him into a feeling of false security. Biff wondered if the oily-voiced Ramonez could be back of it. He was also wondering what Ramonez looked like and where the secretary was right now. Then, suddenly, Biff's speculations were interrupted by a voice that was certainly not that of Ramonez, for it was sharp and high-pitched:

"Hallo! Hallo!"

Biff looked up and realized that the greeting had come from one of the birds, a big red and blue plumed macaw that cocked its crested head as if expecting a reply. Biff rose from the chair, approached the cage, and returned the word, "Hello!" Instantly, a chorus came from other cages, "Hallo-hallo-hallo!"

Biff retired in confusion at having set off so much chatter. As the birds quieted, another voice piped from behind him: "And hallo again!"

Biff turned in surprise to find himself facing a smiling Mexican youth who extended his hand and said:

"So you are Biff Brewster. I am Mike Arista. The judge is my uncle. We have heard about you from your father."

"You mean he has arrived from the airport already?"

"No, no." Mike shook his head. "He may be another half hour. He told us about you the other times he was here."

Mike took it for granted that Biff knew about those previous visits on his father's part. Actually, Mr. Brewster had not talked much about his recent trips to Mexico, though Biff knew he had business here. Biff was wondering what sort of a reply to make, when a door opened and Judge Arista beckoned them into his study.

The judge was a dignified, elderly man with a white beard and flowing hair. There was a twinkle in his dark, kindly eyes as he shook hands with Biff and said:

"Good evening. I see you have already met my nephew, Miguel."

Biff glanced at Mike, who winced at the name "Miguel." Evidently, he preferred his nickname, Mike.

"While we are waiting for your father," continued Judge Arista, "Miguel can show you our private museum. When Senor Brewster arrives, he and I will join you there."

“All right,” said Mike. “I’ll get the key to the museum rooms from Ramonez.”

“I believe that Ramonez went out,” returned Judge Arista, “but you will find Hernandez there.”

As Mike and Biff started out through the reception room, Mike remarked:

“I suppose you have been to the National Museum to see the Calendar Stone and the other Aztec exhibits.”

“Not yet,” returned Biff. “We have only been here a few days.”

“All the better,” decided Mike. “You should see our little museum first. My uncle is the head of a historical society that is keeping those things together instead of letting them get scattered. Every time they find a new treasure, they add it to the proper group. Someday they will all be given to the National Museum.”

“That is a wonderful idea, Mike.”

“Yes, but it is taking a long time to work out. So far, we have only managed to complete the Tizoc exhibit.”

Mike pronounced the name “Tea-shock.” It rang a bell suddenly for Biff. Slowly, he repeated it: “Tizoc.”

“The Emperor Tizoc,” added Mike. “An Aztec chief who went around dressed like the ancient War God, carving up helpless prisoners with a sacrificial knife.”

“I’ve heard the name,” admitted Biff, with a slight smile. “But to me, it sounded like Tick Tock.”

Mike smiled, too.

“That’s close enough for anyone who never heard it before,” he declared. “A few other Aztec names sound a little like it, but most of them are a lot longer and harder to pronounce. Anyway, Tizoc was a tough hombre, as you say in the States.”

Biff wanted to ask more about Tizoc, hoping to gain a new clue to the mysterious phone call, with its ominous words, “Tizoc-Death-Beware,” which now seemed to link more closely with the riddle of the crystal skull.

But Mike had dropped the subject of Tizoc. They had come to the far end of the patio, where a long, narrow passage went through an archway in the building wall, much like a tunnel. Near the far end of the passage was a gate composed of ornamental iron bars, which showed only dimly. Beyond that was a path that led to a strong door in the outer wall, similar to the one that Biff had entered.

As soon as he noted that the passage was barred, Mike gave it no further thought. Instead, he seemed worried when he opened a door at the side of the passage and looked into a darkened entry where a still darker doorway yawned beyond. Mike called: “Hernandez! Hernandez!” and then listened. There was no reply.

Mike turned to Biff with a frown.

"These are the museum rooms," said Mike. "Hernandez shouldn't have left them unlocked."

"Maybe he forgot to come back here," suggested Biff, "after he let me in."

"It was Alfonso who let you in. Hernandez must still be here somewhere, so let's look for him. I want you to see the Tizoc exhibit. It has everything that went with his War God getup, a mosaic mask, a golden robe, an obsidian knife made of volcanic glass, and the biggest fire opal you ever saw, which only the War God himself could wear."

They had groped through one room and were entering another, where Mike was feeling along the wall for a switch. He found it and pressed it. Fluorescent lights blinked on, suffusing the room with a soft, indirect glow. All about were odd stone statues, bows and arrows, spears and wicker shields adorned with feathers, all actual Aztec weapons.

As Biff's eyes widened in surprise at the bizarre surroundings, Mike exclaimed: "There's Hernandez now, by the Tizoc exhibit!"

Biff saw a figure turning from a dim alcove, which evidently required a special switch to illuminate it. The man was huddled, as though he had been picking up some object from a low shelf as he began to swing about. Hence neither his features nor his figure were easy to discern until he completed his rising action with a rapid whirl into the light.

Then, all became too plain. Instead of Hernandez, the uniformed attendant who had charge of Judge Arista's private museum, Biff and Mike were confronted by a weird figure clad in a golden robe, its face a glittering, leering mask composed of green jade and blue turquoise, giving it an unearthly hue.

Hidden lips hissed through the mask's open mouth as fierce eyes flashed from its hollow sockets. But even more brilliant than the patchwork face with its sparkles of green and blue, was an immense gem that glowed like a living coal from the front of the golden robe. That blazing stone was the great fire opal that symbolized the power of Tizoc!

Any further doubt as to the identity of this legend come to life was dispelled by an object that glinted from one upraised, gold-gloved fist. That was a jagged blade of brownish red, formed of volcanic glass, the knife that Tizoc had used to sacrifice his victims.

"Tizoc-danger-death!"

That triple warning seemed to shriek through Biff's brain as he stood there rooted, a perfect target for the deadly, pointed blade!

CHAPTER III

Mr. Brewster Arrives

“BIFF! Get away! Quick!”

Those words were real enough, and their advice was good. They came from Mike, over by the wall, and Biff instinctively tried to do as he was told, even though he sensed that it was hopeless. He twisted about and dodged toward the opposite wall, almost under the point of “Tizoc’s” descending knife, which missed his shoulder by a few scant inches.

Biff could almost feel the blade sweep by. Grimly, he knew what would be coming next. Another pounce by Tizoc, and the man in the jeweled mask could plant the knife squarely between Biff’s shoulders. If Biff dodged again, he could postpone it only briefly, for space was too limited. Biff’s way was blocked by a chunky stone idol and an assortment of Aztec weapons. And Tizoc was right behind him.

Yet neither Biff nor the man masquerading as the War God expected the thing that happened next. Both were forgetting Mike, who could neither help nor hinder-or so they thought. But right at hand, Mike had a weapon that for the moment was more potent than Tizoc’s obsidian knife. That was the switch that he had used to turn on the lights. Mike pressed it again, plunging the room into pitch darkness.

Instantly, the situation changed. Biff took a quick step toward his right, which happened to be the direction away from the door, hoping that Tizoc would think he had gone the other way. But Tizoc did not even try to follow Biff. The darkness came before the masked man had begun to make a turn. So instead, he wheeled toward Mike’s corner and drove there, hoping to catch the Mexican youth off guard.

Fortunately, Mike heard him coming and dodged away, shouting quickly:

“Get under cover, Biff! He’s after the light switch. If he finds it, he’ll spot us for sure!”

“No, he won’t,” Biff called back. “Not if this finds him first!”

By “this” Biff referred to an Aztec spear that he had brushed against in the dark. He could just about guess where that other corner was. As he spoke, Biff raised the spear and flung it full tilt for his invisible target. There was a cracking sound as the spear struck the wall, followed by a snarl from Tizoc.

The spear had missed. But Tizoc’s triumph was only a brief one. Biff called to Mike again:

“Don’t worry, Mike. I’ll get him for sure if he turns on the light.

Then I'll be able to see him, and I have another spear all ready for him."

Biff didn't have the second spear just yet, but he was groping around in back of the squatty stone idol, hoping to find one. At the same time, he kept up his encouraging talk:

"Find a spear yourself, Mike. Then we can close in on him from two directions. He won't have a chance."

Mike didn't answer. He was shifting somewhere in the dark, perhaps looking for a spear as Biff suggested. But Tizoc responded, as Biff had thought he might. He came driving straight across the room, using Biff's voice as a guide. Biff could hear the crinkly sweep of the masquerader's robe, the eager, approaching snarl that he gave.

Biff called excitedly: "He's coming my way, Mike!"

That was all Tizoc needed to veer his final steps in Biff's direction, which was exactly what Biff wanted. Tizoc's drive ended with a thumping crash into the squatty idol, which Biff had wisely put between himself and the opposite corner. The snarl ended with an angry groan as Tizoc floundered to the floor, the stone image toppling beside him.

By then, Biff was darting out to the center of the room. He paused there long enough to listen for other sounds from Tizoc, but none came. Slowly, cautiously, Biff began creeping for the one place that he thought was safe, the last place where Tizoc would be likely

to go-That was the alcove at the far end of the room, where Biff and Mike had first seen the figure of the living War God. It was like entering the jaws of a trap to go there, but Biff felt that Tizoc himself would not want to be boxed in here. From the way the masquerader had acted, he apparently had been about to leave the museum when Biff and Mike had walked in on him.

Every cautious step that Biff took seemed to bring a creak from the floor. Each breath that he drew came like a hiss, possibly the result of his recent exertion. Biff realized, though, that these sounds were magnified by his imagination. As he reached the alcove, he paused again to listen for Tizoc. All was as silent as before. Either Tizoc was badly hurt, which Biff doubted, or he had resorted to stealthy moves of his own.

Maybe Tizoc had outguessed Biff and had come this way after all! Here, in the blanketing blackness of this inner room, Biff suddenly found himself fighting down frantic fears. He expected each moment to hear the crinkle of a robe, the hollow snarl from masked lips, or to feel the piercing stab of the ancient Aztec knife. Even when he was able to calm those throbbing thoughts, Biff was sure that he could hear some slight motion, someone breathing, so close by that his one hope was that they were sounds he himself was making.

Yet the threat of Tizoc was still so great that the tension became unbearable. On a sudden hunch-how it came, he did not know-Biff ventured a low whisper: "Mike."

An answering whisper came: "Biff."

Both boys had followed the same plan, each with the idea that the alcove was the best place to go.

"Do you know who he really is, Mike?" Biff whispered.

"No," rejoined Mike, "but I'd like to know *where* he is. What stopped him when he went after you?"

"A stone idol that was in his way."

"Tlaloc, the Rain God. I saw you dodging toward it, just before I switched off the lights. He must have knocked himself out on that."

"No, I don't think so. He may have glanced off it."

"Then he's probably working his way out of here."

Of one accord, Biff and Mike listened briefly, on the chance that their whispers had been overheard. Hearing nothing from Tizoc, they began creeping toward the door themselves. They had almost reached the outer room when Mike suddenly gripped Biff's arm and said: "Listen! I hear voices!"

Before Biff could answer, there was a snap of a light switch in the outer room. Through the doorway, the boys saw Judge Arista standing by the outer door. Beside him was a tall, dark-haired man with a tanned, square-jawed face; Biff's father, Thomas Brewster. Then, from somewhere in between, a robed figure sprang in sight, its gloved hand gripping a gleaming Aztec knife.

Biff shouted: "Dad! Lookout!"

Mr. Brewster didn't need that warning. He, too, was driving forward, to meet Tizoc halfway. Mr. Brewster's left hand snapped upward, stopped Tizoc's right wrist like a trip hammer, and jolted the masquerader in his tracks. The obsidian knife scaled from Tizoc's numbed hand, clear to the outer door. But even before it landed there, Mr. Brewster drove a punch to the "War God's" jaw.

That blow should have flattened Tizoc, but his fancy mask took the brunt of it. Reeling, Tizoc reached the doorway, stumbled as he snatched up the knife and turned about. Mr. Brewster, who had paused to rub his knuckles, went after him again. Rather than fight, Tizoc turned and fled out through the anteroom toward the patio beyond. Mr. Brewster followed, until he reached the darkened passage just outside the door.

There, a figure loomed to meet him, and Mr. Brewster was locked in a hand-to-hand grapple that ended a few minutes later, when he finally subdued his foe and dragged him back into the light. Biff and Mike were standing there with Judge Arista, to witness the outcome of the struggle. But the man who had put up the brief fight was not the

masked Tizoc. He was a chunky man wearing an attendant's uniform. Mike turned to Biff and said in utter surprise:

"It's Hernandez!"

The boys went out to the patio but saw no sign of anyone there. When they returned, they found Judge Arista and Mr. Brewster questioning Hernandez, who was rubbing his head and trying to recall all that had happened.

"I was here in the museum," declared Hernandez, "when a voice behind me said: 'I am Tizoc. I have come for you.' Then hands were choking me like this."

Hernandez doubled his elbows and spread the fingers of both hands across his throat to illustrate an attacker gripping him from in back. He went on:

"Then I woke up, out by the gate. I heard fighting and shouting, so I started in here. One man went by me, so I tried to stop the next." Hernandez bowed apologetically to Biff's father: "I did not know it was you, Senor Brewster."

"The man who went by," questioned Mr. Brewster. "Was he dressed like Tizoc, in mask and robe?"

Hernandez blinked, as though the very name of Tizoc frightened him.

"Senor, I did not see. It was too dark."

"Did he go through the patio or through the gateway in the passage?"

"I would not know," returned Hernandez with a shrug. "By then, I was in here struggling with you, Senor Brewster."

Mr. Brewster gave a nod and strode out to the arched passage. Somebody was rattling at the other side of the gate. Mr. Brewster went there, found a bolt, and drew it back. In through the gate came a slender, dark-skinned man with sleek, black hair, whose horn-rimmed glasses gave him an owl-like appearance.

"This gate was open when I went out awhile ago," the man said, in a smooth tone. "Why was it locked now? Did something happen here while I was gone?"

He put the final question to Judge Arista, who was facing him in the light. The judge calmly replied:

"A great deal has happened, Ramonez. Some intruder overpowered Hernandez and fled, wearing the mask and robe of Tizoc. Did you see any strangers while you were outside?"

The sleek man paused, then shook his head. Biff was watching him with real interest, now that he knew the man was Ramonez, the secretary who had talked so glibly on the phone. Mentally, Biff was trying to compare Ramonez' tone with that of the person who had called later and announced himself as Tizoc.

“No, I saw no strangers,” Ramonez told Arista. “Whoever the intruder was, he must have gone out another way-unless he is still here.”

“Summon all the servants,” ordered Judge Arista, “and call the local police. We are going to find this man who posed as Tizoc, if it still is possible!”

CHAPTER IV

The Message of Mictlan

WHILE the search for Tizoc was getting under way, Biff found a chance to talk with his father. He told him what had happened earlier at the Hotel Del Monte: How he had found the crystal skull immediately after Ramonez' phone call; and how later, a voice had announced on the telephone, "Tizoc- Death-Beware!"

When Biff added that his cab had been followed as it neared the Arista mansion, and that someone had tracked him almost to the door, Mr. Brewster tightened his lips grimly and went immediately to the phone in the judge's study. There, with Biff standing by, he called the Del Monte and asked for the Brewster suite.

A moment's pause; then Mr. Brewster told Biff: "The family must have returned, because there is someone talking on the line. But who would be calling there now?"

An answer sprang to Biff's mind: "Tizoc!" He wondered if his mother was receiving a threatening call from that threatening voice. Biff was about to say so, when he caught a quick glance from his father. At the same moment, a tingling sensation gripped Biff, as though someone had moved close beside him, much the way he had pictured the approach of Tizoc in the dark of the museum room.

Biff turned and saw Ramonez almost beside him. The sleek man had entered the study with the stealth of a cat. As he passed Biff, Ramonez smiled blandly and continued to a corner of the study, where he opened a file cabinet and started to look through some papers.

After all, this was the judge's study, and Ramonez was his secretary, which gave him a right to be here. But at the same time he was artfully listening to Mr. Brewster's telephone conversation.

Mr. Brewster, in his turn, practically ignored Ramonez. The call had finally gotten through, and Biff's mother was speaking from the other end. Biff's father was putting leading questions, so she would understand the situation. Mr. Brewster's comments ran:

"So you liked the movie... . Yes, Biff came here, as his message said... . He told me about that, too... . You didn't buy it, did you? ... I rather thought not. ... So Professor Bortha just phoned me? ... You told him to call me here? ... Good ... How are the twins? ... Tell them I'll see them soon... ."

That was all, but from it, Biff gathered that his mother had mentioned finding the crystal skull with his note and that she had not bought it; hence its presence in the hotel room was as puzzling as

ever. Mr. Brewster's inquiry about the twins was his way of finding out that all was well.

So Ramonez had learned practically nothing, other than what he might already know. But Mr. Brewster had provided bait for the eavesdropping secretary. His mention of the name "Bortha" had brought a quick glance from Ramonez, who had immediately covered it by delving deeper in his papers.

Now, Mr. Brewster spoke directly to Ramonez.

"Here is something urgent, Ramonez," Mr. Brewster said.

"Professor Mark Bortha just arrived at Buenavista Station and phoned my hotel. He will be calling here next. I think that Judge Arista should know at once."

The phone began ringing while Mr. Brewster spoke. Ramonez answered it, held a brief conversation, and hung up.

"That was Professor Bortha," Ramonez said. "He is coming here right away. I shall tell Judge Arista."

All this was puzzling to Biff, but an explanation was soon due. Within minutes, Judge Arista arrived in the study, accompanied by Mike and Ramonez. The judge took a chair behind a large mahogany desk and gestured for the others to be seated. Then, solemnly, Judge Arista announced:

"Whoever stole the Tizoc exhibit has disappeared completely. A search of the grounds has produced nothing. Police tell me that the only persons seen in the area were a few taxicabs and a troupe of strolling musicians. Naturally, the search will continue, but meanwhile I feel it wise to prepare a witnessed report for the historical committee."

Judge Arista waited until Ramonez was ready with pencil and notebook. Then he continued:

"Our purpose is to find and preserve the lost treasures of Aztec Mexico. For that we have engaged Dr. Ortiz La Vega, a noted student of Aztec lore and perhaps our greatest archeologist. Dr. La Vega has verified the records of the Tenochcas, the great Aztec tribe that established itself on the site of Mexico City.

"Those records say that the Tenochcas came from the West and that in a great cave, they found a speaking statue of the humming-bird wizard, Huitzilo-pochtli, which guided them further. So they took the statue with them, and Huitzilopochtli became their War God."

When he spoke the name "Huitzilopochtli," the judge pronounced it, "Weet-zeal-o-potch-lee." But from then on, he used the simple term of "War God."

"All this was ended by the Spanish Conquest," the judge went on, "when Cortez destroyed the Aztec temples and rifled them of their treasures. But it is said that the Conquerors never gained a fraction of

that treasure trove. The rest was taken away, hidden, and finally forgotten.

“Where was it taken? Probably back along the trail that had brought the Aztecs to Mexico City, perhaps in some older temples that have never been uncovered. In tracing the route that the Aztecs followed, Dr. La Vega was impressed by the fact that one of their later emperors, Tizoc, actually appeared in the costume of the War God when he collected tribute from other tribes.”

Judge Arista paused while Ramonez read back what he had dictated. It was exact, to the last word.

“So Dr. La Vega visited every place where the name Tizoc is still remembered,” the judge continued. “He is now in the mountain village of El Cielo, high above a great valley, making new excavations. Working with him is Professor Mark Bortha, who spent many years in Egypt, studying buried cities there. Professor Bortha is famous for his ability to decipher ancient inscriptions and therefore is of great assistance to Dr. La Vega.”

Again, the judge waited for Ramonez to repeat the statement, which the secretary did, letter-perfectly.

“During various excavations,” Judge Arista went on, “Dr. La Vega has uncovered the shafts of several ancient mines. It is difficult to tell whether or not these date back before the Spanish Conquest. If they do, they are important, because in that case they were dug by the Aztecs themselves and may have been used as hiding places for their treasures.

“To determine this, we called upon a mining expert, Senor Thomas Brewster, who has come to Mexico to examine the excavations and give an opinion. If he finds that these are actually Aztec mines, more money will be raised to continue our work.”

Judge Arista paused again and this time turned to Mr. Brewster with the query:

“Have you any report to add, Senor Brewster?”

“Yes,” replied Mr. Brewster. “From specimens of rock and fragments of timbers taken from the El Cielo excavation, I would say definitely that crude Aztec tools had been used in digging the old mine shafts. A full inspection is therefore advisable.”

Ramonez took that down, too, then read it back in his smooth, precise tone. Biff’s interest was now at a high pitch, for he had learned the part his father was to play, and it promised new adventure.

“Put this in the report,” Judge Arista told Ramonez grimly. “Tonight, the entire Tizoc exhibit, the most valuable in our collection, was stolen from the museum rooms. Measures will be taken to prevent further thefts, but until those items are recovered, we are at a standstill. At least, we must learn the purpose behind this unforeseen

outrage.”

A voice spoke coolly, steadily, from the doorway:

“I think I can answer that, Judge Arista.”

Everyone turned to see a stockily built man with broad, blunt face and short-clipped hair, its reddish shade extremely light in contrast to his deeply tanned features. The lips above his wide jaw were set in a firm, serious line.

“Ah, Professor Bortha!” exclaimed Judge Arista. “I am glad you have arrived. You have heard what happened here?”

“I heard it just now,” returned Professor Bortha, “but it does not surprise me. In El Cielo, our work has been interrupted by rumors that Tizoc, the War God, is planning to return. Workers claim that they have seen some of the Eagle Knights who once accompanied Tizoc as an honor guard.

“Rather than have such rumors grow, Dr. La Vega has halted work until we can make a thorough survey of the shafts so far uncovered and learn just where they lead. He wanted me to report all this, so two days ago, I started by pack mule over the high passes of the Sierras and reached the railway this morning. There I took the train that brought me into Mexico City this evening.”

Mr. Brewster had a query: “Then it will take us three days to get to El Cielo?”

“Yes and no,” replied Bortha. “We must wait three days, yes; but then with the right type of plane we can make the trip and land there in a mere hour or so. Dr. La Vega has put the entire excavation crew to work on the partly finished air strip, and it will be ready by the end of the week. From then on, El Cielo will be accessible at last.”

Judge Arista had one final question:

“Tell us, professor, have you any idea who might be behind this Tizoc rumor?”

“I thought it might be some local mining interest,” replied Bortha. “That is why I tried to contact Mr. Brewster as soon as I arrived. I felt he was the man most qualified to give me an opinion. But now, with the Tizoc exhibit stolen, I am afraid that much bigger problems are involved. How big, I cannot say.” He finished with a shrug: “I am an archeologist, not a detective.”

Judge Arista added the statements of witnesses to the report and then closed the conference. Biff said good night to Mike and joined his father and Professor Bortha, who had decided to accompany the Brewsters to their hotel. They rode in a car driven by Judge Arista’s chauffeur and on the way, Biff asked in a puzzled tone:

“How is it that we aren’t passing the Buenavista Station?”

“Why should we?” queried Professor Bortha. “It is way off in another direction. That is why I called your hotel before going to

Judge Arista's."

"But the cab from the hotel brought me past the station."

"It did?" Bortha's wide forehead furrowed into sharp creases, straight like his lips. "And it was after that, you noticed that your cab was being followed?"

"Yes."

"Then whoever followed it must have been waiting outside the station, watching for me!"

Triumphantly, Bortha turned to Mr. Brewster.

"See how neatly it fits?" the professor queried. "Someone posted that cab outside the Hotel Del Monte to pick up your son or anyone else in the family who might be starting to meet you. So it swung by the station, gave a signal, and another cab picked up the trail."

"With the man who was watching for you?"

"Exactly," returned Bortha. "He may have known that we planned to meet. Therefore he would have considered one trail as good as the other."

"Do you think he was the man who stole the Tizoc costume?"

"I would say so, Mr. Brewster."

"And I," returned Mr. Brewster, "would say that for an archeologist, you are a good detective, Professor Bortha."

For the first time, Bortha's serious lips relaxed into a broad smile.

"I suppose the two have much in common," he said. "But a man should not wander far from his own field. I must confine my detective work to deciphering ancient inscriptions and identifying odd objects from the past."

"We'll give you a chance at that right now."

The cab was stopping at the Hotel Del Monte as Mr. Brewster spoke. Biff noticed a puzzled frown on Bortha's face as Mr. Brewster led the way upstairs.

Biff's father introduced Professor Bortha to Mrs. Brewster, then went directly to the table and picked up the miniature skull that was lying there.

"What do you make of this, professor?" he asked.

Bortha's eyes showed intense interest in the crystal skull.

"An authentic Aztec carving," he declared. "But how did it come here?"

Mr. Brewster nodded to Biff, who said:

"I found it when I answered the telephone this evening."

"Before the call you mentioned at Judge Arista's home? When a voice said, 'Tizoc-Death-Beware!'"

"Yes, sir."

"Then the threat was real indeed," Bortha's voice was low and impressive. "This is exactly what Tizoc himself would leave as a

calling card.” He held it so the crystal eyes glittered in the light. “This skull represents Mictlan, the Aztec God of Death!”

CHAPTER V

The Clue of the Cab

THE next morning, Biff arranged to meet Mike at the National Museum, hoping that they might uncover some chance clue to the Tizoc riddle, which still remained unsolved.

The museum, which had served as a government mint back in Spanish Colonial days, was located in back of the National Palace, and now its treasures were measured in terms of more than money.

Biff was greatly impressed by the huge Aztec Calendar Stone, which stood in the Gran Sala Mexica, a principal exhibit room. The stone measured twelve feet in diameter and weighed more than twenty tons. *It* had elaborate carvings representing the days of the Aztec month, and in the center was a face that Mike identified as Tonatiuh, the Aztec Sun God.

Mike's ability to reel off those curious names and classify them struck Biff as remarkable indeed.

"How you even remember them is one thing," declared Biff, "but keeping them straight would seem impossible-even for the Aztecs."

"In a way it was," Mike rejoined with a smile. "Some of them had special titles. Huitzilopochtli, for instance, was also known as Mexitli, from which the name Mexico comes. But Professor Bortha is the man to answer such questions."

Since Professor Bortha wasn't with them, Mike had to cover a few more details on his own. He showed Biff a sculptured head of an Eagle Knight, wearing a helmet shaped like the open beak of a bird. The sculpture represented one of the ancient warriors that Professor Bortha said the natives in El Cielo reportedly had seen.

There were carvings showing the conquests of Tizoc, in his garb as War God, with captives being brought before him. Other captives were depicted defending themselves against Eagle Knights, like ancient gladiators. But from these, neither Mike nor Biff could gain any explanation for the apparent return of Tizoc, the night before.

That was discussed later, when the judge's car stopped by and took them to the Arista home for an elaborate dinner that lasted from two o'clock until half past three. Biff's father was there, with Professor Bortha, and Ramonez was also present.

Judge Arista looked from one to another, as he stated in a troubled tone:

"If only one of you had been here at the time the boys went into the museum rooms!" He turned to Biff's father: "Unfortunately, Senior Brewster, you were still on your way here from the airport." He

turned and bowed slightly to Bortha. "And you, professor, had not even arrived at Buenavista. As for Ramonez"-he gestured to the secretary, who was seated near him-"he had gone out. Unfortunately, neither the boys nor Hernandez had a chance to see the face of the man who stole the Tizoc mask and used it to hide his identity."

"Perhaps we can trace his earlier actions," suggested Mr. Brewster. "The skull that was left at my hotel may be an important clue."

"I agree with that," put in Bortha, "and I can tell you this: If we fail to find this false Tizoc now, we shall have more trouble from him in the future."

"You mean in El Cielo?" Judge Arista asked.

"Very possibly," replied Bortha. "Tomorrow, I am going to San Juan Teotihuacan to examine some inscriptions that have been found in the archeological zone there. From the past we may gain knowledge of the future, where Mexican legends are concerned."

Biff, by now, had learned enough about the Aztecs to know that the arrival of the Spaniards under Cortez, in the year 1519, had been regarded by the natives as the fulfillment of an old prediction that a hero god would someday come from the "Land of Sunrise" on a winged ship. From what Professor Bortha had just said, the return of Tizoc might be a modern myth of somewhat the same order.

There was another matter, however, that interested Biff still more. When he was alone with Mike, Biff asked:

"Where was Ramonez yesterday afternoon?"

"I don't know," replied Mike. "He has a way of moving in and out like a cat."

"And what time did he go out later?"

"Soon after he telephoned your hotel to tell you to meet your father here."

As Biff pondered, Mike smiled.

"I know what you're thinking," said Mike. "Ramonez could have placed that crystal skull in your hotel room. He might have been the man who stole the Tizoc costume, too. Ramonez is a strange bird. My uncle has often said so."

"Then why does he keep Ramonez as a secretary?"

"Because the historical committee recommended him. He knows every detail about the collection in my uncle's museum. But Ramonez will be taking a vacation beginning tomorrow, because my uncle has decided to lock the museum rooms until the Tizoc mystery is solved."

When Biff and Mr. Brewster were riding back to the hotel, Biff mentioned his suspicions of Ramonez.

"Suspicion is one thing," Biff's father declared. "Proof is another. Let's not be too sure about Ramonez -one way or the other."

At the hotel, Biff and his father were met by a quiet man who

introduced himself as Inspector Gonzales of the Mexico City police. He stated that he had questioned persons working at the hotel and had learned that a maid had left the Brewster suite unlocked the previous afternoon.

"Someone probably sneaked in and left the crystal skull," the inspector stated, "but no suspicious characters were noticed. That leaves us only one lead." He turned to Biff. "What about the cab driver who picked you up outside the hotel?"

"He drove up as soon as I came out," replied Biff, "and he pointed to a sign that said 'Libre,' but I didn't notice him closely. I was busy telling him where I wanted to go."

"And did he try to make a price? Or did he charge you according to the meter?"

"According to the meter."

Inspector Gonzales gave a tired smile.

"All day," he said, "we have been talking to drivers of *turismo* cabs who stay outside hotels and make special prices for tourists. But this must have been a cruising cab, or a *sitio* cab from a regular cab stand. How well did the driver speak English?"

"Not too well," returned Biff. "I talked to him in Spanish. He kept saying, *¡Toto va biert* and finally he said, '*Estamos*' and waited for me to pay him off, which I did."

Inspector Gonzales kept making notes of all that Biff told him. While this was going on, Mrs. Brewster came into the lobby with the twins, Ted and Monica. They had been sightseeing all day, and this was the first time that the twins realized that some mystery was afoot. Quietly, Biff's father explained to them that Inspector Gonzales was checking on suspicious persons who had been around the hotel the day before.

"Somebody must have paid that driver to wait outside this hotel," Inspector Gonzales was telling Biff. "Just to pick you up when you came out. I'd like to know what he looked like!"

Monica stepped forward.

"He was a big man," she said. "He was an American, and he was wearing gray trousers and a tight-fitting sport jacket. I didn't see his face, because he had a big *ranchero* hat, and he kept his head tilted like this"-Monica dropped her head to the left-"while he talked to the cab driver."

Inspector Gonzales listened with mingled surprise and admiration. Then he said: "Repeat that again, please."

Monica repeated it, word for word, and the inspector jotted it down and then asked:

"What else did you notice about him?"

"He had a big, round face," recalled Monica. "Like a moon face. A

reddish face, too. I noticed that because the cab driver's face was much darker. Anyway, the man with the big hat was pointing us out to the driver. When he saw me looking at them, he turned and walked away, and the cab driver went back to his cab."

"When did this happen?" put in Ted. "Or are you just making it up?"

"And why," retorted Monica, "do you think I'm making it up?"

"Because we were together all afternoon, so I should have seen these people too."

"That's what *you* think. Remember when we came back to the hotel just before dinner and you rushed right in through the door ahead of mother and me?"

Ted's face began to turn red as he recalled the incident. Before he could stop Monica, she went on:

"That's when I saw the big man and the cab driver. But when I came into the hotel, mother was lecturing you for being impolite, so I didn't have a chance to say anything about it. I tried to, but mother told me not to interrupt, so I just forgot about it."

Mrs. Brewster nodded that she remembered the occasion, and so did Biff.

"I stayed in the car and drove it around to the parking lot," Biff testified. "I didn't see the man that Monica mentions, but I suppose he pointed me out to the cab driver, too." He turned to Monica. "Next time anything like that happens, be sure and tell me, sis."

"I will," promised Monica.

After Inspector Gonzales had gone, Mr. Brewster clapped his arm on Biff's shoulder and said:

"You see, son? You had Senor Ramonez all wrapped up as Suspect Number One. Now, our chief candidate is a big American with a round red face, wearing sport clothes and a *ranchero* hat. Quite a difference, isn't it?"

Biff nodded. "But I'm still not very sure about Ramonez, Dad."

"Neither am I," returned Mr. Brewster with a serious smile, "but we still have much to learn before we solve the mystery of Tizoc, and many things can happen between now and then!"

CHAPTER VI

The Man from the Mine

TWO days later, the Brewsters took off from Mexico City in a specially chartered plane, bound for El Cielo. There were nine persons on the plane, all told, for in addition to the pilot and copilot, there were two more passengers.

One, of course, was Professor Mark Bortha, who had cut short his study of the newly found inscriptions at the ruins of Teotihuacan in order to return to El Cielo, where more important work awaited.

The other was Mike Arista, who had talked his uncle into letting him go along on the trip, which pleased Biff immensely. Actually, it hadn't taken much talking on Mike's part. As Mike expressed it to Biff: "I told my uncle that you and I had been in on the start of this Tizoc trouble and that we ought to see it through together. So he agreed."

Biff realized that there was more to it than just that, though he didn't say so. Mike's keen interest in Aztec history and legends unquestionably pleased his uncle greatly. So Judge Arista had probably welcomed the opportunity to send his favorite nephew to the scene of new and promising excavations at El Cielo, where Mike could view such work at first hand.

From the windows of the twin-engined plane, they watched the airport drop away as they rapidly gained altitude. Biff heard his father say approvingly to Professor Bortha:

"A good ship, this, for climbing over the mountains. I suppose we'll have to make a steep landing at El Cielo."

"If we can land there at all," returned Bortha. "I just hope that the landing strip is ready. If it isn't, they will wave us off and we'll be forced to return here."

They were now high above Mexico City, which formed a vast, widespread scene of dazzling white, centered in the great bowl of the Anahuac Valley, or Valley of Mexico. Even the city's new skyscrapers were dwarfed when viewed from the plane, but the whiteness of the metropolis was matched by two snowcapped peaks that seemingly towered higher and higher as the plane approached them.

They were the great volcanoes, Popocatepetl, "Smoking Mountain," and Ixtaccihuatl, "White Woman," each rising nearly two miles above the valley, which itself had an altitude of more than a mile and a half above sea level. Professor Bortha mentioned these statistics as the plane droned toward the mountains. Then he told how, in Aztec legend, Popocatepetl was an ancient prince, holding a flaming torch above the perpetually sleeping figure of Ixtaccihuatl, his

beloved princess who had died while he was away at the wars.

Despite the rather drab, matter-of-fact way in which Bortha related these myths, they sounded interesting, particularly as the serious, straight-lipped professor always finished with some pointed conclusion. In this case, Bortha added:

“The detail of the flaming torch proves that Popocatepetl was an active volcano at that time. Even at the time of the Spanish Conquest it was pictured with flames coming from the cone, in native drawings showing Cortez and his men entering the great valley.”

As the plane neared the mighty mountains, which were at the southeast of the valley, Bortha ordered the pilot to set a course due north. The passengers gained a close look at the great peaks as they changed direction; then Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl were far behind them, and Bortha was discussing the next feature of their tour.

“The ancient city of Teotihuacan,” he stated. “It is thirty miles northeast of Mexico City and was originally built by the Toltecs, a race older than the Aztecs, who apparently found the place abandoned when they arrived here and formed their own legends regarding it.”

The plane was dipping low over a small valley, where a great, flat-topped pyramid dominated the scene. Even from the air, the structure was impressive, and everyone was studying it, as Professor Bortha announced:

“The Pyramid of the Sun, once topped by an Aztec temple which the Spanish conquerors destroyed. It is more than two hundred feet high, a long, hard climb, though it may look easy from up here.”

The pilot banked the plane while Bortha spoke, and the ground seemed to slant up to meet the sky, Sun Pyramid and all. Pointing almost straight from the window, Bortha called attention to the smaller and much less imposing Pyramid of the Moon, and then to a lower structure which he termed the Temple of Quetzalcoatl, or the Feathered Serpent.

By then, the plane was leveling and heading west, while Bortha made the whimsical comment:

“According to one Aztec legend, when the moon tried to outshine the sun, an ancient god became indignant and threw a rabbit at the moon. So instead of seeing a man in the moon, many Mexicans picture a rabbit there.”

“Remember that,” said Ted to Monica. “If you see the man with the big moon face again, he may have rabbit ears sticking through his *ranchero* hat.”

Monica giggled, and Bortha stared so sharply at the twins that Biff thought for the moment that the professor was offended. To ease the situation, Biff asked politely: “Just where were the inscriptions that you were studying the past few days, Professor?”

Bortha didn't seem to hear the question, so Biff repeated it. By then Bortha was smiling slightly, as if realizing that the twins were joking.

"They were in a new excavation near the Temple of Quetzalcoatl," stated Bortha. "I found a great many items of interests to report to Dr. La Vega." He opened a brief case and brought out a sheaf of papers covered with rough sketches and written notes. "Remind me to dictate these on the machine when we reach El Cielo. It will take me a couple of hours."

"Did you learn anything about Tizoc?" inquired Mike. "I mean from the inscriptions?"

"No, they were all too ancient," replied Bortha. "But I still have hope that some of the older legends of the Toltec era will give us a key to the thinking of the later Aztecs. The histories of the early Mexican races are like loosely connected links, rather than a complete chain."

"Speaking of chains," put in Mr. Brewster. "Look at those mountains below us!"

They were climbing above the Sierra Madre range, which bulged like the backs of great gray elephants. The altimeter showed 12,000 feet, yet still more seemed needed to clear these *Cordilleras*, as the mountains were also called. There were literally hundreds of such peaks, fading off as far as the eye could see.

Great gullies, jagged ravines, showed among the mountain folds as the plane continued its climb, bumping occasionally as it encountered cross-winds and air pockets above the mountain passes. At one stretch, a highway skirted one mountain flank, only to vanish beyond the next peak.

"We saw mountains like those when we were driving up the big climb from Tamazunchale," recalled Biff, "and we wondered what lay beyond them. Remember, mother?"

Mrs. Brewster smiled and replied: "Now we are finding out. Just mountains and more mountains. It's a long way between highways."

"And between railroads, too," said Professor Bortha, indicating what looked like a thin pencil line down in a deep gorge. "That is the one I came in on, the other evening."

The mountains continued in endless procession, the main difference being in the valleys. Some were deeper and greener than the others; a few had a lush, tropical appearance. Finally, the plane dipped into one valley, banked to avoid the opposite mountain wall, then followed a course up the valley itself. The green ground became a rugged canyon, studded with cactus and a few sparse trees. Bortha called attention to a huddle of dilapidated buildings, far below.

"An old silver mining settlement," he stated. "A man named Justin Kirby has been trying to revive it, sending out silver and bringing in

mining machinery by pack train. You can see the trail going up the side of the mountain.”

There it was, zigzagging toward a lofty summit that formed a dead end of the valley. Close to the ridge was a cluster of adobe buildings surrounding a picturesque church, one house set above another, like a series of steps.

“That is the village of El Cielo,” Bortha said. “Look to the left, and you will see our excavations.”

A great mound of rough, broken stone extended beneath the highest portion of an overhanging cliff which rose five hundred feet above. A tiny hole was visible, like the entrance to a mine shaft. Above it stood a small, square wooden cabin.

“That cabin is our operating base,” Bortha explained. “Dr. La Vega spends most of his time there. But it is much more comfortable in the hotel above the town. It was once the hacienda of a wealthy mine owner.”

Biff noted the building that Bortha mentioned. It was a wide, sprawly structure, overlooking the town. The pack trail continued up in back of the old hacienda and over the ridge, just short of the towering cliff. But now the plane was veering toward the right of the little village, toward a ledge that was hewn in the mountainside. Tiny figures were signaling from the ledge.

“The landing strip is ready,” declared Bortha with a sigh of relief. “They are waving us in.”

The rocky wall loomed forward to meet the plane; the ledge itself seemed to lift and receive the landing gear. The plane braked to a stop with one wing tip extending over the ledge and its nose pointed toward the village. As the passengers alighted from the plane they were received with a roar of welcome.

Practically the entire population of El Cielo had turned out to greet them. Biff saw native men wearing white trousers and colorful scrapes with big sombreros on their heads. The women were attired in full skirts and loose blouses, all quaintly embroidered. All had happy, smiling faces. They had seen airplanes before, but this was the first that had ever visited their cliff village.

To Biff, it was like an old Aztec legend come to life. He turned to Mike and was about to say so. But Mike spoke first.

“These people are sharp!” Mike exclaimed. “Right up to the minute. They even have *mariachis* here to meet us!”

“*Mariachis?*” queried Biff.

“Yes,” replied Mike. “Those musicians over there, with the violins and big guitars. The biggest ones are called *guitarrons*.”

Biff saw the group that Mike mentioned. A dozen in all, they were strumming away as loudly as they could, and three of them were

piping on odd-sized flutes that should have been heard, but weren't, because of the clamor of the crowd.

"Strolling musicians!" exclaimed Biff. "Like those who were seen near your uncle's house after the Tizoc exhibit was stolen!"

"I hadn't thought of that," returned Mike. "I wonder if I've seen any of that crowd before. I'm even wondering why they should be here. See that one in the middle with the *guitarron*? He looks familiar to me, Biff. Take a look at him."

Before Biff could look, Monica had rushed up. She had something to say that not only took Biff's full attention, but Mike's as well.

"I promised I'd tell you, Biff, if I saw him again!" Monica exclaimed. "The man with the big rabbit ears -I mean the man with the big moon face- Oh, I wish that Ted would stop teasing me the way he does."

"Go on," encouraged Biff. "The man with the moon face. The American with the gray suit and the big *ranchero* hat."

"That's the one I mean," nodded Monica. "Only he's wearing different clothes now, except for the hat."

But he's tilting his head, the way he did before. He's right over there."

As Monica pointed, Biff looked, and so did Mike. They saw a burly man, dressed in a rancher's outfit, wearing the exact type of hat that Monica had described. He was turning away, but Biff glimpsed his face. It was round and moonlike; and his head was tilted, as though he hoped to hide his features.

A moment later, and the man was gone, beyond the crowd of natives. When Mike tried to rouse Biff's interest in the *mariachis*, they were gone beyond the crowd too. Only the strum of their stringed instruments could be heard in the distance. But the situation was not a total loss.

Professor Bortha had stepped up in time to hear Monica's last excited words and to note the man that she had mentioned. He nodded as he glimpsed the *ranchero* hat before it bobbed from sight beyond the native crowd.

"That man," declared Bortha, "is Justin Kirby, the mine owner from the valley. Why should he have come up here to greet us?"

"I don't know," replied Biff, a bit bewildered. "I am wondering why he should have been in Mexico City, where my sister saw him last."

Professor Bortha turned to Monica.

"You saw Kirby in Mexico City?"

Monica nodded. Almost word for word, she repeated everything that she had said before regarding the man with the big *ranchero* hat outside the Hotel Del Monte. While Monica was speaking, Professor

Bortha drew a notebook from his pocket and jotted down every word that she said.

“This will be included in my report to Dr. La Vega,” declared Bortha, in his serious tone. Then, relaxing into one of his rare smiles, he added: “Now let us forget such things for the moment. The villagers of El Cielo are here to greet us. We must return their welcome!”

CHAPTER VII

Four Slips of Paper

“WELL, boys, the excitement is over.”

Mr. Brewster clapped one hand on Biff’s shoulder, the other on Mike’s as they stood in front of the Hotel Pico, as the old hacienda was called. Just below, groups of villagers were returning to the town, waving back as they went.

They had carried all the luggage from the plane up to the hotel. If they had been allowed to do so, they would have carried the passengers as well, so eager were they to give these strangers from the sky a real reception.

There was no sign, though, of Justin Kirby, the round-faced mining operator from the valley. A few of the *mariachis* had come along with the crowd, but the *guitarron* players had evidently decided that their instruments were too big and cumbersome to carry all that way. They were not with the rest.

Now, briefly, Biff told his father about Kirby; how Monica had pointed him out as the man she had noticed in Mexico City. Biff’s account brought a smile from Mr. Brewster.

“I think Monica was impressed by the big *ranchero* hat,” Mr. Brewster declared. “It could have made her picture Kirby as the man she had seen before. Still, Kirby could have been in Mexico City three days ago and managed to get back here by now, even by pack train. I’ll keep that in mind when I meet him. Visiting local mines is part of my job.”

Mr. Brewster paused, studied the two boys, and then asked: “Is there anything else?”

“Only the *mariachis*” replied Biff. “They reminded us of the strolling musicians in Mexico City. Mike thought they might be the same ones who were outside his uncle’s house.”

“I guess my imagination was working, too,” put in Mike a bit sheepishly. “I realize now that most of the *mariachis* came from small towns originally, so even a village like El Cielo would have its own band.”

“Since that is all settled,” Mr. Brewster said, “suppose we go and talk to Dr. La Vega, over at the excavation. First, let’s find out if Professor Bortha can come along.”

“I don’t think he can,” said Biff, “because he has to dictate his report on those inscriptions out at the pyramids. He said it would take him a couple of hours. But I’ll go and ask him if he wants to come.”

Inside the hotel was a patio, with rooms all along the far side,

much like a modern hotel, though the hacienda had been built at the beginning of the century. Ted and Monica were at a table in a shady corner, playing a word game on a board that they had brought with them.

When Biff asked, "Have you seen Professor Bortha?" Ted nodded.

"He went into his room to work five minutes ago," said Ted, "and he's been at it ever since. Listen."

Biff listened. The precise tones of Professor Bortha were coming in sonorous style from a door that bore the number eight. Some of his words were in Spanish, but mostly he was quoting long sentences in a strange language which Biff decided must be Nahuatl, the native tongue of the Aztecs, though it could be mixed with Mayan, as spoken by the Toltecs.

As soon as Bortha paused, Biff knocked on the door, but the professor simply resumed his dictation. At another pause, Biff rapped again, this time more loudly than politely. Professor Bortha opened the door, and said, "Oh, hello!" and then stepped back to turn off a tape recorder that was on his table.

When Biff asked whether he wanted to go with them to the excavation, the professor shook his head.

"I've just started dictating the first reel," he said. "It will take a full hour, and then I'll begin the next one. I think two reels will just about do it. So tell Dr. La Vega that I'll see him in about two hours from now-or a little later."

Biff left, and Professor Bortha promptly resumed his tape recording, his voice coming through the closed door before Biff was halfway across the patio. Outside, Biff rejoined his father and Mike. He told them what Bortha had said, and they started on their way.

The path forked soon after it left the hotel. One branch turned steeply up the slope to join the pack trail which crossed the ridge just short of the towering cliff. The other branch descended gradually in back of the village until it reached the excavation cabin, below the cliff itself.

This was the path that Mr. Brewster and the boys followed. A ten-minute hike brought them to the cabin, and during the last stages, the cliff seemed to tower more and more formidably, until it finally seemed to be hanging directly above them. The cabin, built on rough, uneven stone, was like a toy in the grip of a monster's claws.

"Weird, isn't it?" Biff said to Mike, as they started up the cabin steps.

"I'll say," was Mike's reply. "It gives me the creeps to go inside the place!"

They didn't have to go inside, just then. Dr. La Vega met them on the threshold, greeted Mr. Brewster with the warmth of an old friend,

and shook hands cordially with the boys. Then he said:

“Let us look at the excavation first, Senor Brewster. Then we can discuss our problems in a much clearer way.”

The excavation began as a simple mine shaft, then leveled into a long tunnel lighted by a string of electric bulbs. Mr. Brewster examined the rough-hewn walls as they moved along.

“Undoubtedly of Aztec origin,” he declared. “This tunnel was chopped out with very primitive tools.”

They reached a chamber with a slanted ceiling formed by stones that appeared to be wedged in place. As Dr. La Vega pointed up into the light, his face resembled yellow parchment, smooth except for the few slight wrinkles of his constant smile.

“What about this?” he asked.

“Definitely not a mine,” declared Mr. Brewster. “It looks more like an outer room of an old temple.”

“Exactly,” agreed Dr. La Vega. “It was filled with loose stones when we found it. We tapped the walls for other passages and finally found this one.”

He was leading the way to the far wall, and they climbed up through a slanted shaft to another chamber where the ceiling was shored up with timbers. Here, half a dozen workers were digging into a pile of earth and stone that they had very nearly cleared.

“Each time we dig out this room,” stated Dr. La Vega, “there is another fall of stone. The natives are superstitious”—he lowered his voice to an undertone—“so they blame it on Tizoc. The last time they cleared it, they thought they saw some of his Eagle Knights down here. It took me a week to get them back to work. By then, the room was filled again.”

They went out through the tunnels, and Mr. Brewster made a new study of the walls as well as the supporting timbers.

“Those props look strong,” he said, “but you can’t be sure of anything while that stone keeps falling. This whole slope may be honeycombed with underground rooms and passages, which makes it all the more dangerous. A big slide might take the shorings along with it.

“One thing is certain.” They had reached the outer shaft when Mr. Brewster gave this final opinion. “This was not an ancient mine. There are no traces of any valuable ore. The Aztecs may have looked for gold here, but they did not find it.”

Outside the shaft, the daylight seemed very bright indeed, despite the gloom cast by the overhanging cliff. As they followed Dr. La Vega into the cabin, Mike whispered to Biff.

“This doesn’t bother me the least bit, now. That big cliff is nothing, after that trip underground. I don’t blame the workers for wanting to

get out.”

The cabin was furnished much like an office, except for small living quarters in a back room and a kitchen galley adjoining it. Dr. La Vega offered coffee to his visitors and took his place behind a plain, flat desk, where he spread out a large chart and showed it to Mr. Brewster.

“Here is the work done so far,” La Vega declared. “Now, instead of tunneling deeper, I am more inclined to excavate, digging away the entire surface, uncovering everything in order.”

“That might be best,” agreed Mr. Brewster, “now that you know that those are not mining tunnels.”

“But the natives keep speaking of it as a mine,” said Dr. La Vega. “They have kept that tradition from the early Spanish days, although the Spaniards never tried to work the mine.”

“Naturally not,” said Mr. Brewster. “One look would have convinced them that there was no gold there.”

“And that may have been what the Aztecs *wanted* them to think. Because they were hiding something greater! Perhaps their own lost treasure!”

Dr. La Vega leaned across the desk, his eyes agleam with unrestrained excitement. Then, calming himself, he added:

“There is a secret here somewhere, and someone is after that secret. This talk of Tizoc and the Eagle Knights is part of the game. I can prove it!”

He paused, glanced at his watch, and asked:

“How soon did Professor Bortha say that he would be here?”

“In about two hours,” replied Mr. Brewster, “from the time we left the hotel.” He studied his own watch methodically. “That was almost an hour and a half ago.”

“No need to wait, then,” decided Dr. La Vega. “I wanted to show this to Bortha, too, but I can tell him about it later. Yesterday, some stranger handed one of our workers a message. He read it, tore it up, and threw away the pieces.”

Dr. La Vega brought an envelope from the desk drawer, opened it, and slid some torn bits of paper onto the desk.

“Here are those pieces,” he continued. “A loyal worker named Chaco gathered them and gave them to me. Look at these four first.”

He laid the slips on the desk.

HOMBRE QUE ORO ROJO PLATA

Mr. Brewster studied the slips and translated them: “*Hombre*-man.

Que plata-What silver. *Oro*- gold. *Rojo*-red.”

“And now,” said Dr. La Vega, with a smile, “suppose we piece them with the other five and see what a difference-“

He halted and gave a sudden quiver. Biff stared, puzzled, for oddly, he felt himself shuddering, too. He looked at his father and at Mike. They also were shaking. Biff suddenly realized what was happening, even before Dr. La Vega exclaimed:

“Outside-everyone-before we are swept away! This must be an earthquake!”

CHAPTER VIII

Strange Disaster

THE cabin itself was rocking by the time they reached the door. Its walls were cracking, buckling, and the ground, too, was sliding crazily as Biff and Mike landed there, with a side-by-side jump.

They came to their feet, hoping to help Mr. Brewster and Dr. La Vega, who by then should have been coming down the cabin steps. Instead, they saw Biff's father turning back into the cabin. Seconds later, he was coming out again, dragging Dr. La Vega with him.

They reached the steps, and there the old archeologist broke away again, shouting that he had to save his records. Before Mr. Brewster could grab him, the cabin took a sidewise topple. Mr. Brewster landed beside the boys, while Dr. La Vega was carried along with the cabin, which looked as though it would go over the mountainside. But when Biff looked for the cabin, he saw it disappearing into the ground itself. Meanwhile, men were pouring out from the nearby shaft; they were the workers who had been below. Yet beyond them, the village of El Cielo stood undisturbed.

Biff turned to Mike, who was half sprawled on the ground and exclaimed:

"This isn't an earthquake! It's a cave-in! The props have gone out from under!"

Biff had heard enough from his father regarding mine disasters to realize what had occurred. In those few moments, Mr. Brewster had already sized up the situation and was clambering forward, knee deep in cracking stone and sinking earth, to rescue Dr. La Vega, who was sliding down into the hole that had swallowed the cabin.

Both figures faded momentarily in a cloud of rising dust as Biff gripped Mike's arm and urged:

"Come on! We've got to help them, or they'll never come out alive!"

It was a question, too, whether the boys would come out alive when they reached the spot where Mr. Brewster was dragging Dr. La Vega from the broken boards that had been the cabin steps. But the ground itself was spreading into the form of a huge funnel, making it impossible to climb up over the expanding rim.

Apparently, Dr. La Vega had been knocked unconscious by a falling chunk of wood or stone, for he was an inert figure in Mr. Brewster's grasp. Biff and Mike, tugging at Mr. Brewster's shoulders, kept slipping back at every try.

The scene resembled a volcanic crater, the thick, dry dust rising

like a cloud of smoke. From its midst, Mr. Brewster spoke chokingly:

“Get clear, boys! I’ll try to hang on while you bring help. But get yourselves clear first!”

“We can’t,” panted Biff. “The whole ground is slipping in on us.”

“If we don’t get help now,” added Mike fervently, “we never will!”

With that, help came. Down through the choking dust came a tawny face, below it, a white-shirted arm, with a brownish, brawny hand, that reached for Biff’s. From the face above came the spoken order:

“Grab quick! Chaco pull you out!”

Biff made a frantic upward scramble and caught Chaco’s hand just in time to avoid slipping back. With his free hand, Biff caught one of Mike’s. In turn, Mike was able to grip hands with Mr. Brewster, whose other arm was around Dr. La Vega’s body.

Still, they were a long way from rescue; in fact, it seemed hopeless. Biff’s arm seemed to be wrenched from its socket; he realized he could not stand the prolonged strain of all that weight. He wondered what would happen when Chaco began to pull on him.

But Chaco did not pull. Patiently, he waited, keeping his face lowered to avoid the dust, while Mr. Brewster worked one hand upward, using first Mike’s body, then Biff’s, as a human ladder, until finally he gripped Chaco’s chunky form.

During that climb, most of the strain was on Mr. Brewster, who was dragging Dr. La Vega up with him. Biff and Mike simply hung on tight and dug into the slipping earth as well as they could. Then, when Mr. Brewster had gone out of sight into the dust beyond, Chaco told the boys:

“Now, you come.”

Now, for the first time, Chaco pulled, slowly, easily. With only Mike’s weight hooked to his own, Biff did not feel too much strain. Biff clutched Chaco’s body and continued on; a moment later, Mike did the same. Past Chaco, they found a human chain composed of the workers from the shaft, continuing on, six men in all, until it came to solid ground. There, another pair were acting as anchor men.

The going was easy during the final stages as the slant of the ground was less and the sliding earth comparatively slight. There was no more dust when they reached the solid ground and there, the boys found Mr. Brewster bending over Dr. La Vega, who was still unconscious.

Now the workers themselves came crawling up from the funnel, human ladder style and Chaco, after a glance at Dr. La Vega, turned solemnly, inquiringly to Mr. Brewster.

“I think he will be all right,” said Mr. Brewster, referring to Dr. La Vega. “But we must get him up to the hotel right away.”

Chaco had two workers bring a stretcher from an emergency shack near the open shaft. They placed Dr. La Vega on it, and the two men carried the unconscious archeologist up the sloping path, with Mr. Brewster and Chaco walking alongside, keeping careful watch.

Mr. Brewster was limping slightly, at moments painfully; but neither Biff nor Mike had suffered more than a few minor bruises. Noting that the boys were in good shape and eager to help, Mr. Brewster suggested that they hurry ahead and arrange for the hotel to summon a physician.

The disaster at the foot of the cliff had been so sudden and so brief that it had failed to wake the sleepy village of El Cielo from its afternoon siesta. The news had not yet reached the hotel. But Mrs. Brewster, who was dozing in a chair while the twins still played their word game, woke instantly when the boys dashed into the patio. Sensing something wrong, she asked: "What has happened?"

"Dad is all right," Biff was quick to inform her, "but Dr. La Vega has been hurt in a cave-in."

"You had better tell Professor Bortha," said Mrs. Brewster. "He is still in his room, dictating his notes."

"Dad said to get a doctor."

"I'll have the hotel clerk send for one."

Bortha's loud, steady tone was still coming from room eight when Biff knocked on the door. This time, Bortha's dictation stopped suddenly, and he came to the door, holding the last page of his notes in one hand.

"Just a few minutes more," he began, "and I'll go with you to see Dr. La Vega—"

Biff interrupted to say that Dr. La Vega was being brought to the hotel and as Mike added details of the cave-in, Bortha's eyes went wide with alarm. He hurried from his room to meet the stretcher bearers as they entered the patio. Mrs. Brewster arrived to say that the hotel was sending for the village doctor, and Mr. Brewster commented:

"Good. Dr. La Vega has already become partly conscious, but he must be kept quiet until we know how seriously he is hurt."

They placed Dr. La Vega in a bedroom, and Mrs. Brewster, who was an experienced nurse, took charge of the patient. In the patio, the twins listened breathless while Mr. Brewster related all that had happened in a style that was all the more dramatic because it was simply told.

Standing by were the workers, silent and stolid as if nothing had happened. It seemed that nothing could disturb them until Professor Bortha turned to them with a puzzled expression and asked:

"But how did you manage to escape the cave-in? You were at the

inner end of the tunnel when it happened-and if it happened so quickly-

The workers interrupted with an excited babble in their native dialect, until Chaco quieted them and became their spokesman. He turned to Mr. Brewster:

"Ten, fifteen minutes after you left us-maybe more-the lights went out, very sudden. We heard a voice, saying, "Go-go quick! *Pronto!* On came the lights again, and there he was-you remember where we had been digging, Senor? Right there he stood."

The babble rose again, the usually stolid workers reaching a high pitch of excitement as Chaco continued:

"He was wearing the face with all the jewels- green and blue-with the big stone that shines like fire, here"-Chaco tapped his fingers against his chest -"and he was pointing this way, with the big knife"- Chaco extended his hand-"telling us to go-"

The other voices now were drowning Chaco's as his excited companions shouted with new frenzy:

"Tizoc! He tell us, 'Go-or you will die!' So we go! Tizoc has saved our lives!"

CHAPTER IX

At the Sign of the Bull

ANOTHER hour had passed. The native workers had left the Hotel Pico, all except Chaco. He was waiting to hear the report of the village *medico*, who had arrived in the meantime and was now probing the extent of Dr. La Vega's injuries.

But before they had left, the workers, to a man, had repeated Chaco's story of the appearance of Tizoc, with added descriptions that were complete in every detail.

Unquestionably they had met the same jewel-masked, gold-robed figure that Biff and Mike had encountered in the Arista mansion. As final touches, he had been wearing the matchless fire-opal and brandishing the unique obsidian knife-Tizoc's symbols of authority.

Professor Bortha had questioned the workers narrowly on all those points, using their own native dialect, a carry-over from the Aztec days. Now, Bortha summed it: "Whoever the man was, he must have been wearing the stolen Tizoc costume. Someone must have brought it here from Mexico City."

"That would not have been difficult," observed Mr. Brewster. "But how did this impostor manage to get in and out of the excavation? Is there another passage leading there?"

"None that I know," returned Bortha. "What puzzles me is how Tizoc caused the collapse of the tunnel, timing it so exactly."

"That was simple enough," said Mr. Brewster. "The shorings, though strong, had been so arranged that if a few were knocked away, the rest would go. But Tizoc still needed a way out for himself and the men who helped him."

"You mean he needed helpers?"

"Absolutely. It was too fast for a one-man job unless a heavy explosive charge was used. In that case, I would have noticed the shock in La Vega's cabin."

Biff knew that his father, through long training as an engineer, could sense a slight blast, even at a great distance. He whispered that fact to Mike, who was seated beside him in the hotel patio, both listening eagerly to all that was said.

"There is one man," declared Bortha slowly, "who knows a lot about mining operations. That man is Justin Kirby, who is reviving the old mines in the valley. He knows a lot about our excavation work, too"-Bortha set his straight lips rather grimly-"because he has been steadily stealing our workers."

"By offering them better wages?" asked Mr. Brewster.

“At first, yes,” Bortha replied. “Then came all this Tizoc talk. Kirby could have been behind that. When workers said they saw Eagle Knights moving in and out of the excavation, they could have been some of Kirby’s crew, sent to scare our men. I don’t think he can afford to pay high wages any longer.”

“Because he is running short on funds?”

“Yes. He sends out shipments of silver by mule train, over the trail behind this hotel; but when they come back with supplies and mining equipment they are less than half loaded. Now comes this Tizoc business-“

There was an interruption as the village doctor came from Dr. La Vega’s room. He reported to Professor Bortha and Mr. Brewster:

“The patient has a severe concussion, which has caused some lapse of memory. He keeps talking about some torn slips of paper, saying that he is sure that he can find them and that they will explain everything. I advise complete rest until his condition improves.”

As soon as the *medico* had left, Bortha gave a puzzled frown and asked:

“What could Dr. La Vega mean by torn slips of paper?”

“These.” Mr. Brewster brought the four slips from his pocket. “I was looking at them when the cave-in started. So I held on to them. But there are five more that Dr. La Vega still had. They went in the landslide, along with the cabin and everything in it.”

Bortha studied the slips that Mr. Brewster showed him. Bortha was prompt in his interpretation:

“*Hombre*-man-that could be Kirby. Very probably, because the next slip says: *Que plata*-what silver or which silver-and Kirby is mining silver. And this one: *Oro*-gold, yes, Kirby wants gold, too. But *Rojo*-red-I don’t see how it fits.”

Ted and Monica had been listening, too. Now the twins were really in their element. To them, these slips were just another word game. They edged forward, and suddenly Ted exclaimed:

“I see how it fits! Look, the slip with *rojo* fits right after the one that says *oro*. *Oro rojo*. Gold red!”

“Red gold,” corrected Mr. Brewster. “That could mean copper. Kirby would be more likely to find old copper mines than gold mines.”

“The Aztecs mined both gold and copper,” commented Bortha, “but they paid little attention to silver. There may be more to this Tizoc game than we realize. Kirby may be hoping that the natives here will lead him to old, forgotten mines.”

“Where will we find Kirby now?”

“He has probably gone down to the valley. No wonder he dodged from sight at the landing strip this morning. He wouldn’t want us to see him in El Cielo, while he was planning to pose as Tizoc.” Bortha

paused a moment, then added in a reminiscent tone:

"In fact, Kirby has been avoiding me constantly. He used to stop here at the Hotel Pico and keep his mules in the corral out back. But when Dr. La Vega told him to stop influencing our workers, he walked out in an angry mood. Now he stops at a little *posada* or inn, down in the town. The 'Bull's Head,' they call it-or the 'Fighting Bull,' I forget which. It has a picture of a bull over the door."

"We can get back to Kirby later," decided Mr. Brewster. "Our first job is dig out that excavation and learn what caused the cave-in. Do you have a plan of the tunnels?"

"No, those were all in the cabin. But I have some rough diagrams which give the original measurements."

Bortha went to get them, and Mr. Brewster told Biff and Mike that there would be no need for them to stay. The boys strolled out through the front door of the hotel and stood there, looking down at the quaint town of El Cielo, with the vast valley yawning like a tremendous gulf below.

"Let's go down into the village," suggested Biff, "and look for that inn Professor Bortha mentioned."

"And look for Kirby, too?" laughed Mike. "Not much chance of finding him now; but anyway, let's go-"

They were starting down a steep path, with the roofs of the town so close that they seemed within a pebble's toss. But that was an illusion, caused by the fact that the town was so much nearer than the far reaches of the distant valley. At the end of a few minutes descent, El Cielo hadn't budged a foot.

Then, rather suddenly, the whole perspective changed. The slope of the ground was more gradual; the village seemed to rise and the valley began to lengthen. Over the tops of houses, Biff and Mike could see for miles to a huge mass of green between flanking mountains that faded gradually into a gray haze.

"Tropical foliage!" exclaimed Biff. "That valley must be more than a mile deep."

"About a day's ride down," calculated Mike, "and the same coming up. You have to take it slowly on muleback, with one foot dangling over the edge of a trail, a mile above nothing!"

"Then you'd have to start early to make it by dark?"

"I would say so, Biff. That's why they have a corral up at the hotel Pico. The hacienda was built where they made the first overnight stop on the trail. They had to put the mules up, too."

They had reached a back street of the village and were watching their footing on the rough cobblestones. But Biff's mind was still on the mule trail.

"If Kirby staged the Tizoc act over in the excavation," declared

Biff, "he couldn't have made an early start down the trail to the valley. He'd still be staying over at the Bull's Head."

"Or the Fighting Bull," returned Mike. "We'll know which to call it after we see the sign. But you've got a good point there, Biff."

Biff's immediate answer was, "Ouch!" as he almost twisted his ankle on a cobblestone.

"These streets have their points, too," he laughed. "But getting back to Kirby. Even if he has left the Bull's Head, maybe we can find out how long ago it was. One hour-two-"

Mike was nodding, as he looked along the narrow streets. He interrupted, suddenly:

"You're right, Biff."

"About Kirby?"

"Yes. See there."

Biff looked along the street and saw a waddly mule, led by a native in white trousers, blouse, and sombrero. Hanging from the mule's flanks were big bunches of bananas and meshwork bags of hemp containing dozens of ripe oranges.

Biff was puzzled.

"What has that to do with Kirby?" he asked. "Kirby ships out silver and brings back mining equipment."

"It's all the same to a mule," replied Mike, "whether he carries bars of silver or bunches of bananas and bags of oranges. Both come from the valley. This man started early with his mule. They are just getting here now-"

"I get it," interrupted Biff, with a grin. "So Kirby is probably still here, as I thought."

"Yes. So now we find the Fighting Bull."

They weren't long in finding it. The streets of El Cielo were steep, in fact so steep in places that they became steps cut in the cliff side. But those streets were short, closely meshed, and few in number. The buildings were mostly two stories in height, so from each corner, the boys could look over the block below, because it was one story lower.

As a result, they recognized the inn even before they saw its sign. Though no taller than the other houses, it was twice as long and three times as wide. Biff and Mike turned the corner and came to the low archway that formed the front entrance.

A lazy-looking fruit peddler was propped against the wall beside the archway, surrounded by bunches of two- and three-day-old bananas. He beckoned to the boys and waved a hand toward the bananas as though inviting them to buy. But they gave him only a brief glance.

They didn't even have to ask the banana seller if this was the town inn. Above the arched doorway was a crudely painted picture of a big,

reddish bull charging head down as if to drive customers away.

The bull was mostly head, so the tavern could well be called the Bull's Head although the local artist had added a body, which was definitely undersized. That had enabled him to show the bull's front hoofs kicking up the ground, with its tail waving in a wild, menacing fashion, which classified it as a fighting bull as well.

But Biff and Mike weren't worried by such technical angles. They didn't even waste time talking to the banana man. Instead, they moved into the arched entry, where Biff whispered:

"This is the place. What do we do now?"

"Wait here a moment."

As Mike spoke, two *mariachis* walked past the doorway. They were carrying small guitars and wearing low, narrow-brimmed sombreros with oddly decorated edges which matched the designs of their colorful scrapes.

Apparently, both musicians belonged to the same troupe. They were talking to each other as they strolled by, and did not notice Biff and Mike. When the pair had passed, Mike pointed to a pudgy, dark-faced man who was slouched behind a desk in the lobby, half asleep. Then he indicated a stairway, just beyond.

"I'll talk to the innkeeper," whispered Mike. "Start up the stairs and wait for me."

Biff reached the stairway while Mike was waking the man at the desk. He heard Mike ask for Senor Kirby; then followed a conversation in Spanish, from which Biff gathered that the innkeeper was telling Mike that Kirby had gone out an hour before and might not be back until after dinner.

The word *veinte-quatro* was spoken back and forth, and from it, Biff decided that twenty-four was the number of Kirby's room. Biff moved softly upstairs and was waiting near the door when Mike joined him. Biff motioned for silence.

"The door is partly open," he whispered, "someone may be in there."

With one accord, the boys moved to the door and peered through. In a far corner was a table. There, a man was going through a stack of papers that he evidently had taken from a suitcase which was lying on the bed, for he was putting the papers back into it as fast as he weeded out the few he wanted.

The sunlight was still strong at the window near the table. Biff and Mike noticed that the man was wearing a costume identical with those of the musicians who had passed by on the street below.

Moments later, the strum of guitars floated through the window. It was music typical of *mariachis*, and the man at the desk took it as a signal. He tossed the remaining papers into the suitcase, glancing at

the last few as he did.

Except for that, the boys would have been none the wiser. As it was, the man turned his face into the sunlight before removing his heavy-rimmed reading glasses.

They gave his face a solemn, owlsh expression that could not be mistaken. The intruder in Kirby's hotel room, this man who posed as a strolling musician, was Judge Arista's secretary, Jose Ramonez!

CHAPTER X

Mike to the Rescue

IF RAMONEZ had headed directly toward the door, he would have caught Biff and Mike flat-footed. Instead, he moved quickly to the back of the room, brushed aside a curtain that looked like the entrance to a closet, and opened a door at the back. The boys promptly realized what had happened, for they caught a glimpse of the door as Ramonez closed it behind him.

Outside, the guitars were thrumming louder. There was a pipe of a flute and a beat of a drum, indicating that more musicians had joined the group. That was the way with the *mariachis*. But this time, it was something out of the ordinary.

"Kirby must be coming back," Biff told Mike. "That was the signal to Ramonez."

"Come on then!" Mike gestured toward the stairway. "Let's get out while we have a chance."

"The back way is better," said Biff, moving toward the curtained closet. "Then we may be able to follow Ramonez."

Mike hesitated, then offered a quick compromise.

"You go that way," he told Biff. "I'll go out through the front. If I can't make it, I'll double back here."

"Good enough."

Biff reached the closet, drew the curtain shut, all but the very edge. He waited, knowing that the next minute would tell the tale. Biff found the knob of the door at the back of the closet, ready for a quick exit if Mike came scurrying back, as Biff half expected that he would.

Soon, heavy footsteps sounded in the hall. Past the curtain's edge, Biff saw the bulky figure of Justin Kirby entering the door, followed by a stocky Mexican who was also in a ranchero's costume.

Biff knew then that Mike must have reached the front door safely. He felt safe enough himself, for the moment, here behind this curtain, with the hidden door so handy. Since Kirby was talking to his companion, Biff decided to wait and hear what they had to say.

"Somebody left the door unlocked," Kirby was grumbling, "but there's nothing to steal here anyway. Nothing except some no good mining stock and a lot of letters. But I still don't like it. You understand, •Pablo?"

Kirby was speaking in English, but Pablo apparently understood, for he responded, "*Si, Senor.*" Then, with a short laugh, Kirby added:

"The one thing they won't find is money. I paid all I had to those mule drivers of yours, and they still want more. They'll get it later, but

meanwhile you've got to keep them happy."

"Si, *Senor Kirby. Yo lo entiendo.* I understand."

The sunlight was lessening, but Biff could still see Kirby's figure plainly outlined against the window, where the big man had suddenly found his suitcase open on the bed. Angrily, Kirby began pawing through the papers. Then he stopped and strode to the hallway, where he bellowed:

"Alvaro! *Suba usted!*"

He was calling for someone named Alvaro to come up, and while Biff watched tensely, the innkeeper appeared from the hallway. By then, Kirby was back at the suitcase, sorting its contents. As soon as he saw Alvaro, he stormed:

"Somebody has stolen some of my papers. Who has been up here?"

Biff decided this was the time to ease out. Kirby's attention was focussed on Alvaro, who was trying to stammer a reply. So Biff gave the door a gentle shove with his shoulder. At first it didn't budge, so he made sure he had turned the knob to the full extent. Biff pushed again, but the door seemed stuck, so even at the risk of a slight noise, he drove his full weight forcibly against it.

Again, it refused to budge. That hidden door was more than stuck. In sudden horror, Biff realized that it was solidly bolted from the other side. Ramonez had been smart enough to cut off any pursuit through this little-used exit. His foresight had turned the closet into a trap for Biff!

Grimly, Biff wondered what to do next. The answer was simple: Nothing. He could only wait here, hoping that Kirby would go out again, leaving the way clear to the hallway door, or to the window, if Kirby locked that door behind him. The window had bars, to prevent people from climbing through it from outside; but Biff felt that from the inside, he might squeeze out, if he tried long enough.

Unfortunately, he wasn't going to have that opportunity. Things were taking a real bad turn, right now.

Alvaro had remembered Kirby's most recent visitor.

"There was a young man who asked for you only a little while ago," Alvaro told Kirby. The innkeeper was speaking in Spanish, but slowly, to impress his words on Kirby. So they were plain enough to Biff, in fact, too plain.

"He asked for you, *Senor Kirby*," the innkeeper continued, "and I told him you would be back after dinner. He wanted to know the number of your room, so I told him."

"And he came up here?"

"That I would not know for certain. All I can say was, I did not see him go out. I was sleepy, *senor*, because I had missed my *siesta*."

"You are always sleepy!" snapped Kirby. "You were asleep when I

came in just now.”

“I am sorry, señor.”

Biff realized that Mike must have managed to sneak upstairs without the innkeeper seeing him. Not only that, Mike had managed to slip by the drowsing man when he went down again. So far as Alvaro knew, Mike might still be up here.

“What did this young man look like?” demanded Kirby. “Did he have light hair? Was he an American -about sixteen or seventeen years old?”

“No, señor,” replied Alvaro. “He had dark hair and he was Mexican, very well spoken. His age-maybe about what you have said.”

The innkeeper was describing Mike, not Biff. But that did not help the situation. If anything, it stirred Kirby more.

“Whatever he looks like,” the big man boomed, “if he came up here, he is still here. There’s just one place he would be, in the closet behind that curtain.”

Cold perspiration was forming on Biff’s forehead. Despite the stuffy warmth of the closet, he felt chilled, almost frozen as he pressed back against the locked door. There were some clothes hanging at the side of the closet, so Biff tried to edge behind them, only to realize that they would not help much if Kirby whisked away the curtain. Unquestionably, Biff would be discovered.

But Kirby had other ideas. He had shifted his position, for Biff could hear him speaking loudly, harshly, from near the hallway door.

“Come out of there!” Kirby ordered. “I have a gun here, and I’m going to let it blast if you don’t show yourself. Come out-*pronto!*”

Gripped by sudden hesitation, Biff waited too long. He heard what sounded like the click of a revolver hammer. He sensed that if he moved now, it would be too late; that Kirby would fire anyway. With a sinking feeling, Biff wished that the door behind him would open.

With that, the door gave. Biff did more than sink, he sprawled backward, down some short steps. There, his fall was stopped abruptly by another figure who came up to meet him halfway. In the gloom, Biff saw his rescuer.

“Mike!” gasped Biff. “Get that door shut-“

Mike didn’t need the admonition. At that moment, Kirby, annoyed by the delay, cut loose with his gun. He fired one shot high, perhaps as a final warning. Its bullet plowed through the top of the door as Mike was closing it. Then, crouched on the steps, Mike reached up and shoved a big bolt shut.

“This way!” Mike hissed, pointing to another door. “It will take us out the back!”

Kirby had fired another shot, this one a little lower. The boys could hear the muffled report, with the splintering of wood above their

heads. With that, Kirby must have rushed into the closet, hoping to find someone there, for they could hear him stamping about, shouting, “*Es un tonto, muy loco!*”

By then, Biff and Mike had reached the back alley, which was almost at the level of the second floor. Mike chuckled. “Kirby is calling the innkeeper a fool and a very crazy one.”

“I guess that would apply to me, too,” rejoined Biff ruefully. “What a sweatbox that place was-and here I am, shivering with chills!”

“Don’t blame yourself,” said Mike. “How were you to know that Ramonez had bolted the door behind him? I didn’t guess it myself, until I got back here.”

They had reached a narrow, cobbled passage that ran between the hotel and the next building. Mike guided Biff down the steep grade to the front street. The passage was almost dark, as the building cut off the fading sunlight.

“I ducked up through here,” explained Mike, “in order to avoid Kirby on the front street. Then I couldn’t figure which way you’d gone, so I looked in the back door.”

“And then,” added Biff, “you found that I just hadn’t gone anywhere.”

The boys gazed cautiously along the front street when they reached it. The *mariachis* had gone; only the fruit seller was there, flanked by the big bunches of bananas. Nonchalantly, Biff and Mike walked pass the open doorway beneath the sign that depicted the charging red bull. All was quiet within, indicating that Kirby and the innkeeper were still arguing things out, up in room 24.

As the boys threaded their way through the narrow streets, they glimpsed occasional musicians, but none looked like Ramonez. One man was carrying a tall, cylindrical drum with a skin head, which he thumped rhythmically as he stalked along to join his companions.

“A *huehuetl*,” said Mike. He pronounced it “way-way-tel,” and he was referring to the drum. “The *mariachis* use them in the villages around Mexico City. I wonder if those musicians were carrying one when they went past my uncle’s house.”

“Why?” inquired Biff, a bit puzzled.

“Because they could have stowed the Tizoc costume in it,” declared Mike. “Mask, robe, knife and all-“

They were turning a final corner as Mike spoke. Ahead were steep, narrow steps, leading up past an old adobe wall. The last gleam of the setting sun was focussed on that one spot, as Biff exclaimed:

“Speaking of Tizoc-look there!”

Mike looked. Like Biff, he saw the brilliance of a golden robe, the sparkle of a jeweled mask above it, the glint of a glass knife blade poised in a gilt-gloved hand. Again, the menacing figure of Tizoc was

prepared to strike!

CHAPTER XI

Danger Below!

THIS time it was Biff who pulled Mike to a place of safety, returning the favor of half an hour earlier. The Tizoc of old was famous for his eagle eye, but whether he could have spied the two boys in the gathering dusk was still a question. The modern "Tizoc" most certainly did not see them, thanks to the speed with which Biff drew Mike into the last doorway along the steep street.

They waited, breathless, ready to dodge for other safety in case Tizoc came down the steps and invaded their chance shelter. Tizoc, armed with that crude but long-bladed knife, was far too dangerous for the boys to tackle, as they remembered from the fight that they had waged in the dark at Judge Arista's. Here, there was still enough light to give Tizoc all the advantage.

But Tizoc did not come their way. When they looked again, the masked figure was gone from the top of the steps. Evidently, he had skirted the adobe wall to reach another street down to the village, if that happened to be his destination.

Biff and Mike took advantage of the break. They raced up the darkening steps, pausing long enough at the top to take a last look for Tizoc. There was no sign of him in the dusk, so they kept on up to the Hotel Pico. It was dark when they reached there, so suddenly had the sun dropped beyond the mountains. Below, El Cielo was a twinkle of lights as if welcoming Tizoc home.

Mr. Brewster was in the patio, going over the rough diagrams that Bortha had made and making calculations of his own. He listened as Biff and Mike excitedly related their recent adventures. The near-meeting with Tizoc particularly impressed him.

"I want Professor Bortha to hear about that," Mr. Brewster declared. "He is over at the excavation watching for Tizoc to return there. Instead, Tizoc must have decided to throw a scare into the village."

They were having a lavish dinner of *mole de guajolote*, an Aztec dish of turkey with a special piquant sauce, when Professor Bortha arrived and joined them at the table. When Mr. Brewster told him the news, Bortha's usually firm-set face showed marked annoyance.

"This Tizoc seems to be avoiding me," asserted the professor. "I was still on the train coming into Mexico City, the night he appeared at Judge Arista's home. When I was dictating my notes here at the hotel, Tizoc was at the excavation, undermining Dr. La Vega's cabin. Then when I go over there to look for him, he shows up in El Cielo."

“He has certainly given you the run-around,” agreed Mr. Brewster. “But why?”

“You might better ask, ‘But who?’ He is probably someone who is afraid that I would recognize him if I met him face to face, mask or no mask.”

“And you think that would be—”

“Justin Kirby,” completed Bortha. “He’s made trouble for Dr. La Vega and myself from the very start. He was in Mexico City when the Tizoc costume was stolen there. He was here in El Cielo when the cave-in occurred. Tizoc was seen this evening, and Kirby is still in town. That about settles it.”

Mr. Brewster was not convinced on that point.

“The same applies to Jose Ramonez,” he reminded the other man. “He was close by when the theft occurred at Judge Arista’s. Now the boys say that he is here with the *mariachis*, which is doubly suspicious.”

“Yes,” agreed Bortha, “Ramonez could be turning the Kirby situation to his own advantage. He knew all about it from my reports. But whichever one is Tizoc, he may be fooling himself about the lost treasure of the Aztecs. Dr. La Vega and I still have no positive proof that we are digging at the spot where it is buried, provided there is such treasure.”

“Those tunnels must lead somewhere,” insisted Mr. Brewster, “and I doubt that any gold or copper was found there. They were probably made to look like a worked-out mine, just so that anyone who found it would ignore it. I was telling that to Dr. La Vega when the cave-in came.”

After dinner, Biff and Mike discussed the question between themselves.

“I’m more suspicious of Kirby,” declared Biff. “Tizoc was tough when he came at me in the dark at your uncle’s house, and Kirby was tough, too. Both times, I felt the same sort of shivers.”

“But Tizoc was clever, the way he slipped out of sight,” returned Mike. “That’s the kind of thing Ramonez does. Posing as a *mariachi* player is smart business, too.”

“The next time we meet Tizoc, let’s hold on to him,” Biff said. “Then we could see the face behind the mask.”

“If we live long enough to get a look at him. I am afraid we must find some other way, Biff.”

The next day brought interesting developments. Dr. La Vega was resting nicely, but was still in no condition to talk. Chaco, however, was up from the village with much to tell. El Cielo was in a furore. Tizoc himself had stalked the streets and had been seen by dozens of the natives.

“They have declared a holiday,” stated Chaco. “A great *fiesta* will be held in Tizoc’s honor. They are telling stories now, of the great things Tizoc did when he lived here many years ago and fought whole armies single-handed.”

“Kirby’s work,” declared Professor Bortha, between gritted teeth. “There will be no excavating done now.”

“But there will be,” Chaco assured him. “Things are very good now, professor. It will take time to plan for the *fiesta*. Nobody will leave town until then. So they will work for us instead of going to the mines.”

“But aren’t they afraid to work for us after the cave-in?”

“Why should they be?” Chaco was puzzled. “None of the workers was hurt, because Tizoc warned us. They say that if there is new danger, Tizoc will warn us again.”

As soon as Chaco had gone, Professor Bortha was triumphant.

“We’ve caught Kirby now!” he gloated. “If he tries to stop our work by coming there as Tizoc, we can trap him. If he never shows up, our work will proceed without interruption. Either way, we win!”

“Kirby knows these workers,” objected Mr. Brewster. “I should think he would have guessed what their reaction would be.”

“You are right,” Bortha admitted. His face became solemn. Then, brightening, he added: “But if we are dealing with Ramonez, it will work out the same. Do you still think that Ramonez is behind this Tizoc business?”

“I have met Ramonez,” replied Mr. Brewster, “and I feel that he could be. Until I meet Kirby, I cannot be sure. So I would like to meet Kirby.”

Mr. Brewster did, the very next day.

A big man riding a little mule stopped in front of the Hotel Pico, swung from his saddle, and strode into the patio where Mr. Brewster was winning from the twins in their favorite word game. The big man grinned as he swept aside his *ranchero* hat and mopped his forehead with a blue bandana handkerchief. He asked:

“You’re Thomas Brewster?”

Mr. Brewster nodded.

“I’m Justin Kirby,” returned the newcomer. “I guess you’ve heard of me. First, tell me: How is Dr. La Vega?”

“He is doing nicely,” said Mr. Brewster, as he rose to accept Kirby’s hearty handshake. “The doctor was just here—”

“You mean the village *medico*” interrupted Kirby. “Maybe he isn’t the right man. I have a doctor down at the big mine who takes care of such injuries. Maybe I should send him up here.”

“When are you going down to the big mine?”

Kirby turned to look at the sun, which was just coming over the

roof on the east side of the patio.

"Today," he replied, "if I can get started within the next hour. Would you like to ride along? I have plenty of mules. Too many. We are sending out a lot of silver, but not bringing in enough machinery."

"Do you have three spare mules?"

"Why, yes." Kirby looked at the twins. "They are coming with you?"

"No, I have two other customers." Mr. Brewster turned to Ted and Monica. "Run out to the corral, please," he said. "Tell Biff and Mike I want to see them."

By the time they reached the corral, the twins were breathless, not just from their run, but because of the news that they brought.

"He's here!" Monica said emphatically. "The man with the red face and the big hat. The one I saw in Mexico City. He looked at me like this."

Monica gave her head a tilt, and Ted nodded.

"Now I can believe you, sis," he said. "He looked just the way you said he did."

"Justin Kirby!" exclaimed Biff. "What does he want?"

"He wants to lend you a couple of mules to ride down to the valley," said Ted. "Dad talked him into it. He will tell you all about it."

Amazed, Biff turned to Mike. "Let's go," he said.

When they reached the patio and saw Kirby seated there, Mike whispered:

"Uno tortuga grande."

Biff smiled. Mike was referring to Kirby as "one big turtle" and Kirby looked the part. But despite his careless way, Kirby had a keen eye. He studied Biff sharply, the moment they were introduced. Then Kirby appeared to relax, but Biff doubted that he really did. He was sure that the big man had appraised him and had decided that he was not the youthful visitor who had made the inquiry at the village inn.

Kirby's expression showed a sudden change as he tilted his head toward Mike. Instantly, Biff knew that Kirby had tabbed the Mexican youth as the one that the innkeeper had mentioned. Almost as quickly, Kirby was all smiles again as he shook hands with Mike and learned that this was Miguel Arista, nephew of one of Mexico's most famous judges.

Professor Bortha came from his room just then. He stared at Kirby in brief surprise, then came over and shook hands in an easy, gracious manner. Kirby's round face formed a grin.

"Good digging, professor," he said. "If you need more men to help you, I can send some up from the valley."

"But I thought," returned Bortha rather coldly, "that you were

hiring all you could get.”

“Not now,” declared Kirby. “It takes money as well as men to mine silver. Things have been getting slack lately.”

Two hours later, Biff and Mike were riding patient mules down a corkscrew trail that made Biff feel shaky when he found one foot dangling “a mile above nothing” as Mike had put it. At one spot, they were forced over to the very edge so that other mules could trudge up past them on the inner side of the trail, bringing oranges, bananas, and other tropical products to El Cielo.

Biff turned his head away from the huge gulf that yawned below and looked back at Mike, who was on the next burro.

“I was wrong about Kirby,” confided Biff. “He seems to be a pretty good sort. You must be right; Ramonez is probably behind this Tizoc game.”

“No, I have changed my mind too,” returned Mike. “I now feel that Kirby is much smarter than Ramonez. So Kirby is probably Tizoc. If he is, there’s no telling what he may try next.”

“He can’t very well knife us.” Biff forced a laugh. “Not here in broad daylight on a mountain trail.”

“He wouldn’t have to do that,” declared Mike coolly. “Just one little nudge the wrong way and your burro might let you slip-down there.”

Mike gestured toward the abyss where Biff did not care to look. A moment later, the nudge came. A fat mule lumbering up the trail with a few extra bunches of bananas brushed Biff’s mount too forcibly.

A sudden shift, and Biff could almost feel the edge of the trail melt away under his mule’s hind foot. The animal lurched and stumbled. Over its neck, Biff was watching chunks of stone that plummeted downward, striking bigger rocks below and bouncing off into space as though inviting him to follow.

There was only one slim chance that Biff could see. That was to spring for safety and grab one jutting stone that projected like a rough cornice from trail edge, just beyond the stumbling burro’s nose.

It was like jumping out into space and back to earth again, but it was worth the try. Then, as Biff shifted in the saddle to launch himself in the grim leap, he heard a shout from behind him:

“Hang on, Biff! Don’t jump. Hang on!”

CHAPTER XII

Chaco Makes a Find

BIFF hung on. Just why he did, he wasn't entirely-sure, except that it was because of Mike's shout. In the adventures that they had so far encountered, team play had become second nature with the two boys.

Now, Mike's advice proved its worth. The saddle was still the safest place, for the burro was clambering back on to the trail. Momentarily, Biff thought he was going overboard in a back somersault to nowhere. Then the mule's front hoofs found solid ground and the animal no longer reared.

This was almost at the projecting stone that Biff had hoped to grab. Biff's eyes went wide as that very stone slid loose, dislodged by the tramp of the burro's hoofs. Lazily, it went over the brink and was gone. If Biff had grabbed it, his weight would have carried it away and he would have gone with it.

Instead, Biff was still on his burro and the surefooted beast had found its way to safety. From farther down the trail, Mr. Brewster and Kirby had heard the shouting and the clatter. They had sprung from their mules and were starting back, but their help would have come too late. Biff's adventure had ended happily before they were halfway there.

Kirby stormed at the natives in charge of the fruit-laden mule train, berating them for being so careless. They merely shrugged and pretended not to understand.

During the rest of the trip, Biff felt occasional shivers when he thought back to his near-disaster. But he had gained a new confidence and was ready now to rely on his pack mule, should any further emergency occur.

When they reached the valley and Biff was riding side by side with Mike, Biff had his first chance to thank his friend for the timely advice that he had given.

"Don't thank me, Biff," said Mike, with a slight smile. "Blame Kirby. Now you know why I don't trust him. He should have been watching those other mule drivers from the time we started to pass them. At least he could have warned us."

"But what would he gain by getting rid of us?" Biff asked.

"Plenty," replied Mike. "Your father would have returned to Mexico City with your family. The excavation work at El Cielo probably would have been abandoned, what with the accident to Dr. La Vega and another one on the mountain trail."

"Then whatever Kirby is after at the excavation would be all his."

“Yes, unless Ramonez is Tizoc, which I doubt more and more.”

Biff had his doubts, too, but they began to fade when the party reached the headquarters of Kirby’s mining operation. There, even Mr. Brewster was impressed by its size; and Biff put the question to Mike:

“When Kirby has something as big as all this, why should he be after something bigger?”

To that, Mike could not find a ready answer.

By “all this” Biff referred to a dozen buildings that spread over half as many acres at the foot of a canyon wall. There were offices, housing projects for the workers, a supply shop, and a corral in which were more than fifty mules.

Other buildings behind high adobe walls contained the mining equipment. Kirby showed his visitors a courtyard where the ore had once been treated by the “patio process” in which mules had dragged big blocks around a stone-floored pit. Next were the stamping mills, where broken ore had been crushed. Other buildings contained more modern machinery, much of it still unpacked from the compact crates and boxes that had been brought by mule trains here to Hacienda Arroyo, as Kirby called the mining center.

“Our ores come from dozens of different mines,” Kirby told Mr. Brewster. “Years ago, one man owned most of them. He tapped one group of mines by drilling a mile-long tunnel beneath them, so the ore could be dropped down through chutes and brought out more cheaply. We are still using the old tunnel.”

Mr. Brewster nodded. As chief engineer for the Ajax Mining Corporation, he was familiar with such methods.

“The mine owner built the new hacienda up by El Cielo,” continued Kirby. “He died soon after, and the place became the Hotel Pico. Relatives split up the mine holdings. Political troubles ended mining operations. Many workings were abandoned, some even forgotten. In order to revive them, I have had to buy up stocks in worthless companies, just to make sure I have acquired the good ones.”

Apparently, Mr. Brewster understood that, too, though he made no comment.

“My problem,” continued Kirby, in a frank tone, “is transportation. You can’t afford to pay men and feed mules to carry loads on a three-day trip over the mountains. Not at today’s costs. It was all right in the old days but not now.

“Shipping silver is difficult enough. Bringing in supplies and equipment is worse. A lot of machinery has to be dismantled and assembled later. A couple of hundred pounds is all a burro can lug over those trails. The more we expand, the more mules we need for extra relays. That means still more costs.”

Kirby paused to wave at a cluster of much-used jeeps that were parked in the office yard.

"We drive those on some of the canyon roads," he stated, "but they won't do for long hauls. That's why I went up to El Cielo to see your plane come in. Maybe we can ship silver and supplies in and out from that landing field."

"Why not build your own field down here?" asked Mr. Brewster.

"I hope to, later," replied Kirby. "But I can't raise money for that job until I can prove that it will pay off. If I use planes from El Cielo, I can see how much I save by cutting out the two-day pack trip beyond there."

That evening, the visitors had a wonderful meal of *enchiladas de polio*, Mexican pancakes stuffed with chicken, as well as *frijoles*, tasty beans served in native style. This was the fare that the mine workers preferred, but there were few of them around. It was plain that Kirby was cutting expenses by employing very small crews.

At dinner, Kirby introduced the surgeon in charge of the small but well-equipped hospital at Hacienda Arroyo. He said he would gladly ride up to El Cielo the next day to discuss Dr. La Vega's condition with the local *medico*, provided the start was not too early.

That suited Mr. Brewster. At dawn the next day, he woke up Biff and Mike, much to their surprise. Over a hearty breakfast of *huevos rancheros*, eggs done in Mexican ranch style, Biff said sleepily:

"But dad, I thought we were making a late start--"

"Up the trail, yes," interposed Mr. Brewster, "so I decided to take advantage of these early hours to look over some of Kirby's mine workings."

They drove by jeep to the big tunnel and followed the track on foot behind plodding mules that were patiently hauling empty cars up a slight grade to receive the ore that came down through the *chorreras*, as Kirby termed the chutes from the old workings above. On the trip out, the mules had an easy haul because of the downgrade which also served to drain the tunnel during the rainy season.

There was time for a quick jeep ride to some of the other mines close by. Following that, Mr. Brewster and the boys returned to Hacienda Arroyo and soon were mounted on their mules, ready to start back up the trail to El Cielo. The surgeon was with them, but Kirby did not come along.

"I have a lot to do here at the mines," said Kirby, when they parted. "So I don't know when I'll be in El Cielo again. Sometimes I stay down here for weeks at a time."

On the way up, they passed the mule train of the day before. But this time it was coming down and had, no bananas, so there was no close brush at the trail's edge. They reached the Hotel Pico well before

dark. There, Mrs. Brewster and the twins heard the story of Biff's adventure on the way down the trail. To Ted and Monica it was quite wonderful; but Biff noted his mother's worried frown and saw his father shake his head in a way that was by no means reassuring, Biff realized then that things might be much more serious than he had supposed.

The next day the surgeon from the valley gave his opinion on Dr. La Vega's condition. He agreed with the local *medico* and said that there had been a severe concussion but no skull fracture. The surgeon advised, "More rest." When leaving, he added:

"Don't expect Dr. La Vega to remember what happened just before the cave-in. His mind will be a blank on that."

That ended any chance of learning what Dr. La Vega had intended to say about the missing slips. Whether "man-what silver-gold-red" referred to Kirby and his mining projects was still a question.

Mr. Brewster brought up that subject a few days later, when he told the boys:

"I asked Kirby about gold when we were down there in the valley. He said that so far he had found none. When I spoke about copper, he admitted he had struck some. He almost had to say so, because copper is so frequently found with silver.

"I am doubtful, though, about Kirby's talk of buying up worthless mines in order to control good ones. That sounds very much like a fake promotion, a scheme to sell stock in some new mining company."

Professor Bortha, meanwhile, had men working round the clock digging out the rubble at the excavation. As the hole grew deeper at the foot of the rugged, towering cliff, only a few men could go down into the pit at one time. Bortha had fenced off the area to keep other persons out, and he was living there in a small tent equipped with cot and cookstove.

"I'll soon be at the bottom of it," Bortha declared. "Until then, I intend to stay here day and night. If Tizoc appears on the scene, so much the better."

Significantly, Bortha slapped a holster containing a revolver. But his straight face showed worry when he looked up toward the overhanging cliff.

"I only hope *el Castillo* doesn't come tumbling down on us," he commented. Bortha was referring to the cliff as "the castle"-a term which the natives frequently used in describing it. "Some of those cracks are big, and a few of the ledges may be shaky."

With Kirby still down in the valley and with no new reports of Ramonez in El Cielo, Mr. Brewster decided to fly into Mexico City on a plane that was coming in the next day. He also decided to take Mrs. Brewster and the twins with him, as they were finding life

monotonous at the Hotel Pico.

Biff saw the family off at the air strip. Mike was with him and in parting, Mr. Brewster said to the two 'boys:

"I should be back tomorrow, so if anything happens in the meantime, be sure to tell me. But I think things will be quiet-for a while. Otherwise, I wouldn't leave here."

That same morning, Biff and Mike watched another mule train wend its way from El Cielo on beyond the mountain, carrying more of Kirby's silver to the railroad, two days' journey farther on. An idea promptly struck Biff.

"Those mules must have come up from the valley yesterday," he said, "so they were corralled in El Cielo overnight. I wonder if Kirby came up with them. If he did, we might find him at the Sitting Bull or whatever they call the village inn."

"And that," returned Mike, "is one place where we should never go, unless Senor Kirby personally invites us."

They walked through other parts of the town, however, but saw no sign of the *mariachis*. It was too early in the day for the musicians to be out strolling in their colorful costumes. On the way back to the Hotel Pico, Biff remarked:

"The twins told me they forgot to take their word game with them. I said I'd look after it for them. Maybe we should play a game ourselves. It's probably about the biggest excitement we can stir up today."

So Biff thought, until they entered the patio. There, Chaco was waiting for them. His tawny face, usually as stolid as a stone carving, was actually flushed with eagerness.

"I have something for Dr. La Vega," Chaco told them. "But his new nurse will not let me see him."

"Of course not," declared Mike. "He still needs rest and quiet. No one can bother him, Chaco."

Chaco turned appealingly to Biff:

"Tell me where to find your father-Senor Brewster-so I can talk to him. It is very important. I have found what Dr. La Vega wanted to give to him."

"Dad has gone to Mexico City," explained Biff. Then, a bit puzzled, he added: "Can't you show me what you've found?"

Chaco hesitated, then nodded.

"While everyone has been digging," he declared, "and taking things they find to Professor Bortha, I have been looking for these." He reached in the pocket of his blouse. "*Una-dos-tres-cuatro-cinco*-here they are. They belong to Dr. La Vega, so I give them to you to give to him."

Chaco opened his hand and let its contents flutter to the table. It

was the five missing slips from the torn sheet of paper that Dr. La Vega had been holding when the ground had swallowed him.

Added to the four that Mr. Brewster had retained, those torn fragments could spell out the answer to the riddle of Tizoc!

CHAPTER XIII

On Tizoc's Trail

EAGERLY, Biff and Mike spread the five torn slips on the table, hoping that they would quickly complete the message; but they were due for disappointment. The five slips showed these words:

LOS VENDE
AFUERA NOS
DEL T EL DIGA

"*Los Afuera*," read Biff. "That would mean 'the' and 'outside.' But the two don't fit. The *los* must belong with some other word."

"I can't see what it would be," returned Mike. "The next slip says, '*Vende nosj*' which means 'Sell us'- but who is going to sell us what?"

"*Del T*," mused Biff. "That means 'of and after it, a word beginning with T.'"

"The other two are easy," decided Mike. "One is '£/' for 'the,' and the other is '*Diga*' for 'Speak.' But where do we go from there?"

Chaco, who was standing dumbly by, came up with a simple but sensible answer.

"Maybe if you put those other pieces with these," suggested Chaco, "you can read the whole thing."

"Unless these are from a different sheet of paper," commented Mike glumly. "They're very likely to be, because they don't seem to fit at all."

"Where are those other slips?" queried Biff. "Dad didn't take them with him to Mexico City, did he?"

"He might have," returned Mike. "Perhaps he wanted to show them to my uncle."

Biff decided to take a look in Mr. Brewster's room, knowing that his father would not object under the circumstances. Some clothes were hanging there. With them was the jacket that Mr. Brewster had been wearing at the time of the cave-in. But its pockets were empty except for a favorite pipe and tobacco pouch that Mr. Brewster carried with him on long hikes.

A search of table and bureau drawers produced nothing. Biff came from the room and called to Mike: "No luck." Mike, still studying the five slips on the table, called back: "Maybe your father gave them to Professor Bortha. Why not look in his room, too?"

Biff tried Bortha's door and found it open. He decided that if the professor hadn't locked it, he wouldn't mind if anyone looked about. Apparently, Bortha had taken most of his belongings to the tent, for the only thing of importance was the recording machine.

With the recorder, Biff found some tapes, all new and still sealed in their boxes except for the one on which Bortha had dictated his notes, and which was still in the machine. The rough notes were there, too, but in looking through them, Biff found no trace of the missing paper slips.

Biff came from Bortha's room more glum than ever.

"I guess Dad did take them," Biff told Mike. "The last time I remember seeing them, Ted and Monica were trying to piece them together like a word game—"

"And maybe that's where they put them!" interrupted Mike. "With the word game! Didn't they say they forgot to take it with them?"

"They sure did!"

Biff started looking through the other rooms. On Monica's table, he found the game box. He yanked it open and there, with lettered cards and counters were the four torn slips that Mr. Brewster had saved from the cave-in.

Soon, Biff and Mike were playing a really serious game, as they tried to match Mr. Brewster's slips with those that Chaco had just brought in. But the more they studied them, the more puzzling the words became.

Biff tried them one way; then another. Finally, he laid the four old slips in a row, as before:

HOMBRE QUE ORO ROJO
PLATA

"We're just sure of one combination," declared Biff. "That is '*Oro Rojo*' or '*Red Gold*': The words fit, and so do the torn edges of the papers."

"Then let's not bother with the other words," suggested Mike. "Just put the slips together and see how their edges fit. Then we'll know if we have all of them, or if they all came from the same torn sheet."

"A good idea, Mike."

Still, they couldn't keep their minds entirely off the words. Mike kept saying, " '*Vende nos.* ' 'Sell us.' But sell us what?" To that, Biff returned: "Sell us what? '*Que plata.* ' What silver. That's what somebody wants to sell us."

Only it wasn't that at all. By finally forgetting the words and going

only by the torn edges, which showed just enough difference to make a perfect fit, Biff and Mike finally completed the message:

*DIGA EL HOMBRE
QUE VENDE LOS
PLATA NOS AFUERA
DEL TORO ROJO*

“Why, silver is out of it!” exclaimed Biff. “Instead of *plata* and *nos*, we have one word: *Platanos*.”

“And *platanos*” put in Mike, “means bananas. Gold is out, too. The ‘T’ in front of *oro* makes it *toro*, bull.”

“And so,” added Biff, “instead of talking about red gold as copper, we should be thinking of a red bull.”

Mike nodded. He read the entire message in Spanish; then translated it into English:

“Dz’ga *el hombre que vende los platanos afuera del toro rojo*. That means: ‘Speak to the man who sells the bananas outside the Red Bull.’”

Chaco, who was listening intently, gave a very knowing nod.

“El Toro Rojo,” he repeated. “The Red Bull. You have seen him, maybe? The bull with the big head and the little feet that kick up the ground like this”- he made a pawing action with his hands-“in the picture over the *posada* in El Cielo.”

“The old inn where Kirby stays!” exclaimed Biff.

“The one that Professor Bortha thought was called the Bull’s Head or the Fighting Bull. Remember the banana seller outside?”

“That’s it,” Mike agreed. “The Red Bull. Professor Bortha’s mind was so tied up with complicated Aztec inscriptions that he couldn’t remember a simple name like that.”

“And while Bortha has been wondering where his workers have been going,” put in Biff, “they’ve been getting directions from the banana seller outside the old inn.”

“And that,” reminded Mike, “is the place where Kirby always stops.”

“Don’t forget that we saw Ramonez there, too,” asserted Biff, “along with his *mariachis*.”

Mike gave a broad grin.

“We’re back to the same old question: Kirby or Ramonez-which?” Mike looked over the roof of the patio and saw that the sun was above the summit of the castellated cliff. “It’s getting late, but not too late to go down to El Cielo and see what’s happening outside the Red Bull.”

Eagerly, Biff accepted the suggestion. Five minutes later, he and Mike were on their way down to the village, positive that at last they had gained a slim but sure lead that would take them along Tizoc's trail.

CHAPTER XIV

The Ancient Cavern

ALL was the same in El Cielo, the village where time seemed to stand still. The banana seller looked like a fixture outside the inn with its painted sign of the red bull, as though both had been put there at the same time.

Now, the question was how to approach him. Biff and Mike hadn't exactly thought of that until they were almost on the spot. Rather than rouse the squatting man's suspicion, they had to form a quick plan of action.

Mike came up with a suggestion:

"Walk right into the Red Bull, Biff, and ask for Senor Kirby. That will give me an excuse to wait out here."

"You go in, Mike," returned Biff. "You can talk to the innkeeper better than I can."

"But he might recognize me. He never saw you, because you were hiding in Kirby's closet."

"Suppose Kirby is staying at the hotel now?"

"All the better. Tell him your father went to Mexico City and that you thought you'd just stop in and say hello."

Mike practically shoved Biff in through the doorway, then gave him a parting wave, at the same time calling loudly, "*Ti espero aqui!*" meaning, "I'll wait for you here."

Inside, Biff found Alvaro the innkeeper asleep as usual and was tempted to turn around and walk right out again. Then, suspecting that the fellow might be catnapping with one eye slightly open, Biff went over and hammered on the desk.

Alvaro opened his eyes and apparently recognized Biff as the young American described by Kirby several days before, for the innkeeper's fat face showed a flicker of surprise. Then, in a sleepy tone, Alvaro declared:

"Senor Kirby has not been here. I do not know when he will be here again. I have not heard from him."

It sounded like a speech that the innkeeper had learned by rote. Biff had to take it or leave it; so he took it and left. Outside again, he turned to look for Mike, only to hear a whisper almost in his ear:

"*For aqui!* This way!"

It was Mike, calling from the narrow passage beside the hotel. Biff joined him there in time to avoid some *mariachi* players that Mike had spotted coming along the street. But the gaily clad musicians went by, never noticing the boys and paying no attention to the banana seller.

During the next hour, more strollers passed, but always with the same result. The boys agreed that if Kirby happened to be in the Red Bull, he was keeping out of sight, and that Ramonez, if still in town, wasn't showing himself with the *mariachis*. But it was getting dark enough for anyone to move along the street unrecognized. Biff called Mike's attention to that fact:

"Look, Mike. Here comes a man in white, but you can't even see his face. From the baggy suit he's wearing, he looks like one of Bortha's excavation crew."

The man stopped by the doorway of the Red Bull just long enough for the boys to see him pull some peso bills from his pocket and start to count them. Mike gripped Biff's arm.

"He's going to buy some bananas," Mike whispered. "Come on, stay close behind him."

The boys were right in back of the man when he handed a bill to the banana seller, whose own face was hidden beneath the brim of his sombrero. Between them, they let the peso note flutter to the ground, as if purposely. As the man in baggy clothes stooped to regain it, the boys heard him say: "Tizoc."

It was like a password. The banana man responded in a low tone: "Tizoc."

"Where will I find him?"

The questioner's words were plain, but the response by the banana seller was muffled beneath his sombrero. Mike drew Biff along hurriedly to the next corner.

"In a few minutes," said Mike, "I'll go back and try that password myself. Come around the block the other way, and I'll meet you."

Biff watched Mike approach the banana seller and do the money-dropping act. Then Mike was on his way again, and Biff hurried around to meet him. Mike was jubilant.

"It worked, Biff!" he exclaimed. "We both gave the password, 'Tizoc,' and when I asked where to find him, he said, 'Take the road up the mountain until you come to the lone cactus. Turn there toward El Castillo. Tizoc will welcome you when the sun is high.' That was all."

That was enough. The boys hurried back through the dusk to the Hotel Pico. There, while having dinner together, they could scarcely contain the enthusiasm that they felt. But when they talked it over later that evening, they decided to play things safe.

"Dad should be back tomorrow," Biff reminded Mike, "so we'd better wait to tell him."

"Until noon at least," agreed Mike. "That's when the sun will be high."

At dawn the next day, both boys were up and counting the hours

expectantly. By nine o'clock, Biff himself was worried when he went out in front of the Hotel Pico and looked down over the village. There, he saw a few white-clad figures trudging up the road and wondered if they were some of Tizoc's recruits.

By the time the men had gone out of sight over the ridge behind the hotel, Biff was studying the sun and feeling even more uncertain. Mike joined him just about then, and Biff expressed what he had in mind.

"The man said, 'When the sun is high,' and it is plenty high right now. Look at it, Mike."

Mike looked and agreed. The sun had risen above the great valley and with a mile of altitude to help, it seemed much higher than the distant horizon, so far below.

"I'd forgotten that the sun rises early from the valley," said Mike, "just as it sets early over the mountains. I wonder just how high it has to be."

"You can't go back and ask," declared Biff, "and if we wait too long, we may miss Tizoc. I think some of his friends have started up ahead of us."

That was enough for Mike. He, too, was eager to get started. Biff decided to leave the torn slips with their pieced message in Professor Bortha's room, along with the professor's notes. Biff wanted to write a message to his father, but decided against it, for fear some stranger might happen to pick it up.

Soon the boys were taking the path that led from the hotel up to the ridge, and they found it much more of a short cut than they had supposed. Though it was a fairly tiring climb, they reached the pack trail in about five minutes. When they looked back, they found that they were just over the ridge and that the Hotel Pico as well as the village of El Cielo had vanished from sight.

The trail itself veered slightly toward the rear slope of El Castillo, which from that angle looked more like a mountain peak than a towering cliff. Far beyond the ridge were the "elephant backs" of the mountains, much like those they had seen during the plane trip. Those gaunt humps, slashed by narrow, barren canyons, were decidedly uninviting compared to the valley view from El Cielo.

Biff pointed out tiny objects that were moving like ants along a distant slope. Puzzled, Biff said: "That can't be the pack train that left El Cielo yesterday. It should certainly be past that range of mountains."

"It must be coming the other way," decided Mike. "A long trip with all those ups-and-downs and snaky curves. It won't get here until some time this afternoon."

A few small cactus plants were scattered along the trail, here

where it followed the ridge. Almost immediately, the boys noted one that was much taller, a variety so different that they realized it could have been purposely planted to serve as a special landmark. What was more surprising was the fact that they were still within ten minutes hike of the Hotel Pico.

"That's our turnoff," declared Mike. "Now we head straight for the big peak."

That was easy, too, for the castellated summit was rearing very close by. The ground near the big cactus was rocky, almost like a paved patch. They had crossed it when Biff pointed ahead and said:

"Look there. Mule tracks."

Hoof marks showed in the soil which now was becoming sandy. But as they looked back, the boys saw that the ground humped slightly behind them.

"Very neat," declared Biff. "You'd never guess that there was a side trail coming in this direction; not unless you were told to turn off at the big cactus."

Within another fifty yards, the hidden trail was bringing them up above the ridge. Mike was pointing toward the higher summit, where some huge birds were soaring off in the direction of the other mountain ranges.

"Eagles," stated Mike. "They are smart enough to stay away from El Cielo, where the people might start shooting at them. But they probably have their nests up in the cliff."

"And that," Biff told him, "is where we are now. If you don't believe me, take a look."

Biff gestured toward the edge of the narrow trail, and Mike realized that they were following a rocky path chopped in the cliff itself. As they moved toward the rim, the boys caught breath-taking views of El Cielo and the valley beyond; but there was something else that impressed Biff more.

"We never would be seen up here," said Biff, "unless we showed ourselves. Why, you could bring a mule train along this cliff edge and nobody would be the wiser."

Mike looked up and studied the scarred rock that jutted above them.

"It looks smooth from below," was his comment, "and that is the thing that fools you." He moved along the narrow trail, then approached the outer edge and waved for Biff to join him. "Say, take a look straight down, Biff!"

Biff looked as straight down as he could. Below, he saw the excavation where Bortha's men were at work. The professor's tent was the size of a handkerchief; the men were like beetles digging in the rubble.

From this height, Biff realized why the cliff seemed like an overhanging wall to anyone below. Instead of being a sheer drop, it was irregular in formation. Its bulge was more of a slant, broken by cracks and ledges, with occasional points of jutting rock. Mike had a name for it.

"It is like an *escalera*" the Mexican youth declared. "A ladder cut into the stone. Hard to climb, but easy to descend. Look there, Biff. See, it would be—"

"Yes, very easy," interposed Biff, "jumping twenty feet from one step to another, with a few hundred more to go if you should happen to miss. Thank you, *mi amigo, Miguel*, but I would rather be on a mule's back, with one foot hanging a mile above nothing. Remember?"

Mike smiled as he replied: "*Si, mi amigo.*"

"You told me about that," reminded Biff, "and later I experienced it. But this business of the *escalera* going down the cliff! Let's forget it and think of something worse."

Now Mike was really surprised. "Something worse?" he asked.

"Yes." Biff now was taking the lead, waving for Mike to follow him along the narrow, rocky path. "We have an appointment, remember? With Tizoc!"

As Biff gave that reminder, the trail came to a sudden end. Just ahead was a rising wall of rock, too smooth to climb, too wide for them to work their way around it. But as the boys paused, wondering which way to turn, they saw the answer to their problem.

Yawning in the cliff itself was the mouth of a darkened cavern which, from its crude appearance, had been hacked centuries before by ancient Aztec workmen. Mike smiled a bit grimly and waved to the gloomy entrance, as he said:

"After all, Tizoc has invited us."

Biff nodded. "Let's go, Mike."

CHAPTER XV

Trapped!

ODDLY, the cavern grew lighter as Biff and Mike moved into it. At first, they didn't realize why. Then they saw that natural fissures in the rock admitted sunlight high above their heads.

A weird hush clung over the place, but it did not worry the boys too long. Gradually, their own whispers seemed to break the spell.

"Whoever Tizoc is," said Biff, "he took advantage of what he found here. This cave must go back to Aztec times."

"So do the people in El Cielo," returned Mike. "Tizoc is taking advantage of them, too."

"Which reminds me," declared Biff. "Some of them came up here ahead of us. Where are they now?"

"Still ahead of us," replied Mike. "They aren't afraid of Tizoc. He invited them here."

"And he invited us, too. Or he invited you, Mike--"

"So he did, Biff. I hadn't forgotten that."

"Then let's move in on him."

They moved in, faster than they expected. As they crossed the cavern, they ran into a huddle of men in baggy white clothes who moved over to give them room. These were Tizoc's new recruits from El Cielo. They thought that Biff and Mike were the same. There was only one great difference. Biff and Mike expressed it in whispers between themselves.

"They're scared," said Biff.

"And we aren't," was Mike's reply.

That was proven when lights began to glow from an inner cavern. The villagers became excited and were ready to run away, while Biff and Mike regarded the whole thing as a show. Then, into the light stepped the figure of Tizoc. As he beckoned, the whole situation changed.

Eagerly, the men thronged forward, and the boys were forced to stay close behind them, rather than be spotted by the keen eyes behind the jeweled mask. What made it worse, as the group fanned out into the inner cavern, other figures were seen flanking the gold-robed Tizoc.

These were the "Eagle Knights," four of them in all. They wore armor of heavily quilted cotton, lavishly decorated with golden feathers. These formed short shoulder capes, like the hackle feathers of a bird's neck. Their helmets resembled the open beaks of eagles, from which they peered with steady eyes and stolid faces.

Each knight carried a heavy war club, in which were set chunks of volcanic glass, sharpened as keenly as a knife edge. Their helmets were stiff, evidently reinforced with wood or metal, while they held large shields of stout wickerwork, covered with thick hides and trimmed with short, ornamental feathers.

The pride and tradition of the ancient Aztec warriors were shown in the bearing of these modern Eagle Knights, who evidently served as Tizoc's personal bodyguard. Fortunately, they kept staring straight ahead, paying little or no attention to the new followers who had come to join Tizoc's cause, whatever it happened to be.

So Biff and Mike, keeping to the background, had only to avoid the scrutiny of one man-Tizoc himself.

That would have been easy if they had changed from the sport clothes that they had been wearing since they reached El Cielo. As it was, their white shirts and slacks marked them as plainly as the fancifully clad Eagle Knights. All they needed now were baggy pants and blouses, plus big sombreros, and they could have gotten by like any new recruits. For Tizoc was speaking to them as a group.

So far, however, Tizoc had not noticed the two misfits. The boys hoped that their luck would continue.

The cavern in which they now stood was hollowed into the shape of a dome. This had probably been done centuries ago, for the walls and ceiling were crudely hacked from rough volcanic stone that glittered with chunks of obsidian, the natural glass that must have fused when this tall peak was an active volcanic cone.

The floor was fairly smooth, worn that way perhaps by the feet of many warriors, back in the days when this was a hidden Aztec stronghold. Low archways led to other caverns, how many or how large, it was hard to tell.

"If we could crawl into one of those dark holes," Biff whispered, "even Tizoc wouldn't spot us. But how do we get there?"

"Wait," Mike advised. "We may have a chance later. Let's hear what Tizoc is telling his new crew."

In the weird, half-glow of the domed cavern, Tizoc's mask flashed sharply and his golden robe was a shimmer of lights and shadows. At times, he paused dramatically to lay his gloved hands against his thrust-out chest; when he did, the immense fire opal shone with positive brilliance, its colors changing to every known hue.

Approving murmurs came from the little group at every pause in Tizoc's spiel.

"What is he saying?" Biff whispered. "I can't make out a word of it, except that he keeps saying, 'I, Tizoc.'"

"He's talking in a native dialect," returned Mike. "The real old Aztec lingo. All I can get is snatches of it. But he is promising them a

lot of things, money for one. To hear him talk, they'll all get to be Eagle Knights if they stay with him long enough."

It was odd, indeed, the way the natives accepted the medley of old and new, which was apparent not only in Tizoc's talk, but in the scene itself. Once, this cavern had probably been lighted by primitive torches, set in holes bored in the soft rock. But now, the glow unquestionably came from electric lights, placed high enough to be hidden by slight ledges and outcropping stone.

The wires, too, were invisible, probably hidden in wall cracks, so that the indirect lighting system, crude though it was, made the glow seem a natural property of the cave. In undertones, Biff and Mike agreed that Tizoc, whoever he was and whatever his game, had done a thorough job in setting up this headquarters.

So far, they hadn't seen the half of it.

Now, as Tizoc spoke, Biff caught names he recognized, first the long title of "Huitzilopochtli," and then the shorter term, "Mexitli," by which the hummingbird wizard was also known. Murmurs of approval came from the villagers when Tizoc switched to Mexitli, so he continued to use that title from then on.

Mike was able to translate some of the phrases that came in between.

"He's giving them the old fable with a new twist," Mike told Biff. "How the ancient Aztecs found a speaking statue of Mexitli in a mountain cave-this cave, no less-and how it guided them to a place where they saw an eagle perched on a cactus with a snake in its beak."

Biff nodded. That was the famous legend of how the Aztecs built their great capital of Tenochtitlan, which later became the site of modern Mexico City.

"But listen to this," continued Mike, as Tizoc paused. "This faker is telling them how hundreds of years ago, he came here, as Emperor of the Aztecs, wearing this same mask and robe, to represent Huitzilopochtli, or Mexitli, as he prefers to call him."

"Which the real Tizoc probably did," reminded Biff, "so he is telling them a pretty solid story."

"But he's overdoing it," insisted Mike. "He claims that he brought the talking idol of Mexitli with him and that after all these years, it will speak to them as it did to him, so they can live for centuries as Tizoc has. Now, how can he hope to get away with that?"

Mike's question was promptly answered. Tizoc wasn't banking on mere hope. He had some real tricks up the sleeves of his golden robe. He waved his arms with a spreading motion, and the Eagle Knights moved wide apart. Then Tizoc himself stepped backward and slightly to one side. In the manner of a master showman, he gestured to the

innermost portion of the cavern.

Perched on a rocky pedestal was the stone statue that Tizoc had mentioned. As he approached it, the likeness between the stone figure of Mexitli and Tizoc, the masquerader, proved striking indeed. The stone body, though small and rough-hewn, resembled a robed figure, which was sufficient. The important part was the face. Of natural size, perfectly proportioned, its features were identical with Tizoc's mask.

Automatically, Biff phrased it: "Tizoc to a T!"

"Or the other way about," declared Mike. "The mask that Tizoc is wearing looks as though it was pressed from the statue's face. The mask came from Aztec times; maybe the statue is authentic, too!"

Further whispers were drowned by a booming voice that literally filled the cavern with its heavy tone. It seemed actually to come from the statue of Mexitli as Tizoc stood complacently by. Biff caught the meaning of those thunderous words. The voice of Mexitli was saying:

"I, Mexitli, order you to follow Tizoc!"

As the echoes died, the villagers babbled their willingness to obey. Now, Tizoc was giving orders of his own and sombreros bobbed above nodding heads, Mike grabbed Biff's arm and urged him to the outer cavern.

"Tizoc is telling them to go and meet the pack train," Mike explained. "They are to bring some of the mules here and help unload them. We had better wait here."

Mike drew Biff into a darkened patch, away from a high fissure where daylight trickled through. By then, Tizoc's new followers were thronging out from the inner cavern.

"Let them go ahead," advised Mike. "Give them a good start to the trail, then we can move along."

The plan was perfect. After the villagers had moved out to the narrow mountain ledge, Biff and Mike kept watching the opening from the inner cavern in case Tizoc should appear there. But there was no sign of the masquerader nor any of his armored knights.

"It's clear now," decided Biff. "Let's go."

They went, but not far. Before they were halfway to the outer opening, figures grew from the rough floor of the fissured cabin and closed in with long, leaping strides. More Eagle Knights, a half a dozen of them, who had been lurking here all this time, watching all persons who came in and out!

The bird-helmeted attackers flung aside their war clubs and their spears and swarmed over Biff and Mike in an overwhelming force, suppressing the astonished, outmatched boys in swift, bare-handed style.

From the opening of the inner cavern came a harsh, metallic chuckle. That tone was Tizoc's.

CHAPTER XVI

Over the Brink

TIZOC presented a truly formidable figure as he again stood beside the squatty statue of Mexitli, studying the prisoners who had been dragged before him.

The Eagle Knights had done a swift, capable job of binding Mike and Biff hand and foot, with their arms trussed behind them. They were so tightly tied that it was impossible to move a muscle without pain.

The boys could never hope to slip those intricate knots that Tizoc's followers had tied with all the craft and skill that they had inherited through many generations.

From the faces of the bird-helmeted crew, Biff was sure that all were villagers or natives from surrounding areas who had been hand-picked and sworn to secrecy in Tizoc's service. Biff and Mike themselves had seen exactly how it worked; that was why they were here and in this predicament.

These Eagle Knights must have been among the first to join up with Tizoc. As such, they had earned promotion to their present status. Now they stood by approvingly, almost expectantly, as Tizoc drew the obsidian knife from beneath his golden costume and brandished the red-bladed weapon toward the prisoners.

It was like the scene at Judge Arista's, but here Tizoc was in his own domain. There, he had been forced to fight his way clear. Here, he could bide his time where knife strokes were concerned. But as Tizoc poised the blade, Biff felt sure that he meant to follow through with a brutal downward slash. Biff closed his eyes, wondering whether he or Mike would be the first victim.

A buzz came from the Eagle Knights. Biff opened his eyes and saw Tizoc lowering the knife with a careless gesture, indicating that he did not intend to strike. Next, he made a pretence of cutting Biff's bonds, after which he turned to Mike and went through the same pantomime.

Biff recalled crude pictures that he had seen portraying helpless prisoners trying to fight off Eagle Knights. Often, the Aztec warriors had played that cat-and-mouse game with their victims. Now, Tizoc was going through the pretence of turning over the prisoners to the Eagle Knights, who raised their spiked war clubs in approval.

Then, as a final gesture, Tizoc raised the knife again and stretched it toward the Mexitli statue. He brought his hand downward, slid the knife beneath his robe, as if replacing a sword in its scabbard. The act was over, and its significance was plain.

Tizoc intended to let the prisoners live until he had assembled all his followers, rather than just these few. Biff and Mike already knew how long that would be; until late afternoon, when they returned with the loaded mules from the incoming pack train. That decision made, Tizoc delegated two of the Eagle Knights to watch the prisoners. He then strode off into a side cavern, followed by the remaining knights.

The guarding pair dumped Biff at one side of the domed cavern and Mike at the other. That left the prisoners facing each other, some fifty feet apart, with the Mexitli statue at the rear wall, halfway between. In the dim, uncertain light, the statue's partly open mouth seemed at times to form an ugly, downward leer, as though enjoying the plight of the prisoners.

And a hopeless plight it was, considering the tightness of their bonds and the fact that two armed Eagle Knights were pacing in between, keeping almost constant watch. An hour or more passed; then, the two guards held a conference and decided that only one was needed to keep watch. One left the domed cavern; the other took up a station at the entrance, where he sat facing the statue and could eye the prisoners by simply turning his head either way.

By the end of another hour, Biff's arms, legs, and body had become so numb that they no longer hurt. From Mike's fixed position, he evidently felt the same. Then came the first break in the monotony, a low, distant buzzing sound that rose to a steady drone.

It struck Biff that this was another of Tizoc's tricks, having to do with the fact that Huitzilopochtli had originally been the hummingbird wizard, before becoming the Aztec War God. Oddly, the sound did seem to come from the Mexitli statue, but as it faded, Biff realized that it was an outside noise that had come through from the outer cavern.

That meant it must be the plane coming in from Mexico City, probably bringing Mr. Brewster with it. Now, Biff wished grimly that he had left a note as he originally intended. The only other chance was that Professor Bortha would come up to his room at the Hotel Pico and find the torn slips that Biff had left with the recording machine; but that was most unlikely.

Soon afterward, one Eagle Knight returned to relieve the other, but there was no relief for Biff or Mike. They just sat and suffered in silence, with no way of guessing how long, until Biff noticed that the new guard was beginning to nod as he sat at his post in the doorway.

It was after *siesta* time, and even in this cool cavern, the man was becoming drowsy from mere habit. Several times, Biff watched him try to rouse himself from his nap. Then, with a glance at the prisoners, the Eagle Knight gave a shrug and settled back to sleep, quite positive that the victims could not escape.

Biff tugged at the ropes only to bring pain to his already numbed muscles. Half aloud, he muttered: "It's now or never." Then, hopelessly he decided it would be never. He leaned his head back against the rough wall and a whisper crept into his ears: "Was that you, Biff?"

It could only be Mike, but Biff stared incredulously. Maybe the long ordeal was making him hear things. Then he whispered back, "Yes, can you hear me?" The result was another response from Mike. Then they were talking back and forth in the lowest of tones, even though they were so far apart.

Their whispers were carrying up the curved dome and down the other wall. The cavern was actually a "whispering gallery" and something of an echo chamber. That explained the vast voice that had seemingly come from the Mexitli statue. Tizoc had supplied it by standing alongside and speaking in a heavy, booming tone that had been magnified still further. He hadn't needed to be a good ventriloquist; the mask had hidden his moving lips.

"We've got to get out of here, while we still have time, Mike," Biff whispered urgently.

"Yes, but how?" Mike whispered back. "I'm tied so tight, I can't even move-*ouch!*"

"What happened, Mike?"

"It was like a jab in the back-a muscle, I guess- *ouch*-there it comes again-I don't know what it is-"

As luck had it, Biff had tilted his head, to send his whispers better. His eye caught a glint high in the wall of the cave. He looked lower and thought he saw another sparkle, though the light there was less. In the lowest of whispers, Biff suggested:

"Work your hands up your back, Mike, but carefully. You may get a cut from the sharp edge you find there."

Biff waited; then Mike's exclamation came:

"I've got it. Say, it's like a knife blade. It's the thing that was jabbing me. It's set solid in the rock."

"A chunk of volcanic glass," Biff said. "The walls are loaded with it. Get your wrists over to it and try to cut the rope. But be careful!"

"I'll say I will!"

Mike, too, had seen the blade of Tizoc's obsidian knife and the jagged edges set in the war clubs carried by the Eagle Knights. Biff also was careful as he shifted position as much as he could, hoping that he would have Mike's luck. A sudden jab caught him in the right elbow. That was it. Now they both were working at their wrist bonds.

It was touch and go, dragging the ropes against those glassy points and at the same time avoiding cuts that might prove serious. But they managed it, Mike whispering first that he was free and Biff coming up

with similar news a few minutes later.

By then, Mike was working on his ankle ropes, having managed to shift and draw them across the sharp projections. Biff copied the system, so at no time did they bring their hands in sight, even if the guard had been awake enough to notice. Then, both boys were free. After an exchange of whispers, they rose unsteadily, crept toward the guard as well as they could and finally flattened him with a headlong drive.

The bird-shaped helmet went bouncing across the floor and next, the guard's head thumped the lava. That ended the brief struggle. As the Eagle Knight lay senseless, they bound him with their ropes and gagged him with some of his own feathered trimmings. Then, instead of starting straight out as they had before, Biff and Mike moved into one of the side caverns, hoping to avoid any other guards.

There, in the half-darkness they came across great stacks of solidly packed boxes. Biff thought at first they might be filled with silver, but when he and Mike managed to move a few of them, he decided they weren't heavy enough.

"They must be supplies of some sort," declared Biff, "that came in by pack train."

"Supplies of what?" queried Mike. "I'd like to pry into one of those boxes and find out."

Mike was trying it, with a sliver of rock that he found on the floor, when Biff gripped him and said, "Listen."

They could hear sounds from a corner beyond the stacked boxes. With one accord they moved the other way, found still more stacks blocking them, but finally picked an opening to the outer cavern. It was just in time, for above the dozens of stacked boxes, they saw the helmets of three Eagle Knights moving into the inner cavern where their comrade lay bound.

Then the boys were outside. The daylight seemed blinding, though the afternoon was growing fairly late. Mike could hear the shouts of Eagle Knights from back in the cavern. He urged Biff to hurry along the ledge that formed the only route back to the trail. But at the first turn, Biff drew back, saying: "Look!"

The rock-hewn path was blocked by figures that were coming the other way, men in baggy white, leading burros behind them. Tizoc's new crew had joined with his older followers, and they were bringing in another shipment of boxes from the arriving pack train.

To Biff, there seemed no escape, but Mike knew a way out, for he had thought of this very situation earlier. He grabbed Biff by the arm and dragged him toward the ledge rim.

"We've got to go down the cliff!" exclaimed Mike. "It's our only chance-and there's no time to lose!"

CHAPTER XVII

Out of the Sky

THEY were over the brink and a dozen feet down before Biff realized how harrowing this descent was going to be. Mike had purposely chosen a spot where the cliff slanted slightly outward and sharp clefts in the rock offered natural footholds.

But as they reached the bulge, Biff glanced over his left shoulder, expecting to find another jutting rock. Instead, he saw a sheer drop. Momentarily, the height made him dizzy, but he came out of it by clinging tightly to the bulging rock and looking over to his right, toward Mike.

Mike was as cool as he had been that day when they went down the mountain trail. He quickly sensed Biff's problem.

"Over this way, Biff," Mike told him. "It is like an *escalera*, just as I said." Mike had found a broad fissure that zigzagged downward past the bulge. He worked down it first and Biff followed, feeling his way with one foot, then the other, taking Mike's advice as he did.

"Left foot farther out, Biff. That's it. Don't look down. Keep looking up-always up."

That last was the best advice of all. It kept Biff's mind off the dangers below. It also helped where dangers above were concerned. Their zigzag course took them beneath the bulge that had worried Biff earlier. In so doing, it cut off any view from the ledge, if Tizoc's followers happened to suspect that the escaping prisoners had gone this way.

There were clumps of vegetation in the cliff, growing from patches of earth. Some of the clefts went very deep into the rock, affording good resting spots. At one of these, Biff asked:

"What if we come to a bulge and can't work our way down and around it?"

"Then we climb up again," replied Mike, with a grin. "Don't worry, Biff. I've looked at this cliff both ways. I looked up at it the other day; I looked down at it today. I saw what we could do. We are doing it."

Thus encouraged, Biff continued the descent. They were a third of the way down, working almost side by side when Biff caught what he thought was a hissed signal and turned his head Mike's way. Just then, Mike called: "Get out of there, Biff! Quick! Start climbing the 'other way!'"

It sounded crazy, for Biff had just planted one foot in a wide crevice where he had felt the crunch of firm, solid earth. But he followed Mike's advice instinctively, and it was well that he did. Biff

risked a downward look as he scrambled up the cliff and saw a much closer menace than the rocky ground nearly two hundred feet below.

A big snake had uncoiled close to the spot where Biff had placed his foot. It was striking upward from the crevice, with Biff's leg as its target. Thanks to the slant of the rock, it missed, but as it hissed again Biff heeded its warning. He not only scrambled upward, he sidled along the cliff, digging his toes and fingers into every niche.

At one spot, Biff grabbed what he thought was a writhing snake and he fairly flung the thing away from him, only to realize that it was a vine growing from a dirt-filled pocket in the rock. Half a minute later, he was clinging to an almost perpendicular portion of the cliff, but he was well out of danger, or so he thought.

Then, slowly, grimly, the true situation dawned. In his mad scramble, in letting go of that handy vine, Biff had reached a place where he had sufficient hold to cling, but not enough to give him the needed takeoff to any other vantage point within his reach.

Every way that he tried to stretch, the distance was too great. When he probed with one foot, then the other, hoping to find some crevice below, his toes encountered only sheer, smooth rock. Each effort threw more strain on his fingers; his toes, too, were finding it difficult to regain their former holds. He was wondering how long he could hang on, when he heard Mike's voice, encouragingly close.

"Easy, Biff. Don't go kicking around like that. Can't you find a foothold anywhere?"

"Not even in another snake pit, Mike."

"Hold tight then, while I look it over."

Mike looked it over, working downward, upward, and finally to a level where his shoulders were just about beside Biff's knees. Steadily, Mike said:

"You've got to do exactly as I tell you, Biff. There is a ledge, a nice one, about six feet below you. The only way you can reach it is to slide straight down--"

"It's no good, Mike," Biff broke in. "I'll go outward on the way."

"No, you won't, Biff--"

"But I know I will. Even if there is a ledge, I'll be sliding down too fast to keep my balance."

"I'll take care of that, Biff. I'm going to brake your slide."

"What do you mean, break my slide? What if I get broken with it?"

"I mean *retrancar*, Biff. Not *romper*"

"I get it, Mike. When do I let go?"

"Now."

Gingerly, Biff released his hold. The instant he started that sheer slide, he felt his body go outward, as he had feared. Then Mike's hand came up and planted itself in the small of Biff's back, pressing him

close against the cliff.

Mike was braking the slide as he had said he would. Slow-motion fashion, Biff continued downward, until he was almost beyond Mike's reach. Just then, his feet encountered a ledge and Mike's hand, now shifting between Biff's shoulders, held Biff squarely in place until he gained his balance.

"Get a good grip, Biff," spoke Mike from above. "With your hands as well as your feet."

"I've got it."

"With both hands?"

"With both."

"Then hang on with one and reach my way with the other. Guide me while I slide."

Biff reached up, planted his hand on Mike's back and slowed his slide to the ledge. Mike's slide was shorter, so Biff's task was less difficult. But it was needed.

"Thanks, Biff," said Mike, as he arrived. "I meant B-R-A-K-E instead of B-R-E-A-K. It was quicker to say it in Spanish than to spell it in English."

Biff drew a big, long breath. "From here on down," he said, "I hope things will be easier."

"They will be easier." Mike took a careful, calculating look below. "I can see some very good *escaleras*, so if you stay close, we can make it without trouble."

"You mean like snakes?"

"We'll be on the watch for them now. It will take something worse than snakes to stop us."

"Like what?"

"I can't think of anything."

They didn't have to think. The answer came. As they were working downward, step by step, in an easy, gradually sloping section of the cliff that offered every hold they wanted, a shadowy mass swept above Biff's head.

Mike didn't notice it. He was calm. Biff was doing all the worrying for the present. Biff's thoughts flashed back to Tizoc and his followers. What if they were starting to throw down stones! Fearfully, Biff looked up to see. Close by, Mike said approvingly:

"That's right, Biff. Keep looking up. Then you won't worry."

Biff didn't worry, for the moment. As before, he saw that a broad bulge protruded from the cliff above them, cutting off any view from higher up. Not only that, they were free from attack by Tizoc's men, safer here, perhaps, than anywhere else that they might be.

Yet again, a sudden sweep of fleeting blackness bothered Biff. It was followed by another that seemed closer, more threatening in its

slow, lingering approach.

“Mike!” exclaimed Biff. “Look up-“

“You look up, Biff. I’ll watch what’s happening below. A lot of people are waving up to us. There’s Professor Bortha, coming from his tent. There’s a man who looks like Kirby. I think I see your father-“

Mike broke off. He had seen the sweeping blackness, too. He was hearing what Biff heard, as they both looked up-a huge, flapping sound, close by. Moments later, both boys were clinging to the cliff for their lives, each holding on with one hand while they waved the other arm to fight off attackers that were swooping down upon them from the sky.

Those attackers were giant golden eagles, their wings spread seven feet from tip to tip. With huge, powerful beaks and slashing talons, they were trying to pluck two victims from the cliff: Biff Brewster and Mike Arista.

CHAPTER XVIII

Fiesta in El Cielo

WITHIN a few short, fearful minutes, Biff and Mike realized that their position was hopeless. Biff's shirt was dangling from his shoulders, ripped to shreds by one passing stroke of an eagle's talons. If the bird's big claw had taken hold, it would have yanked Biff from his precarious perch.

Mike's shirt sleeve was half gone, his arm was bleeding as the result of a fierce peck delivered by a powerful beak. Mike, too, was lucky to have warded off that first attack. But the eagles, circling rapidly, were coming down in a more ferocious swoop.

The giant birds, wary in that first attack, now had the boys marked as almost helpless prey. Shadowy darkness descended, the flapping sound became louder, this time accompanied by a sharp, explosive *ping*. Biff couldn't understand it until the *ping* was repeated and the flap of big wings went wildly by, followed by a whine that certainly was not an eagle's cry.

Someone had opened rifle fire from below. Those *pings* were bullets flattening against the cliff. The whine was from a shot that was aimed higher, closer to the eagle's wings. As other giant birds came swooping down, more bullets pinged and whined.

Marksmen from below were trying to drive off the attacking eagles, cutting short their approach with well-placed shots. Some of the bullets must have clipped their feathers, for the eagles became more wary. Their jabbing beaks and outspread claws were missing the boys by wider margins.

One huge bird made a furious swoop, only to be winged by a pair of shots that boomed simultaneously from below. The boys saw the eagle jolt in mid-air above their heads and then go flapping crazily toward the foot of the cliff. Mike looked down and reported what he saw.

"Your father and Kirby are firing those shots," Mike told Biff. "They are on the other side of the excavation. They must have borrowed the rifles from the workers."

Mike's comments were punctuated by further shots and new bullet whines.

"Professor Bortha is shooting, too," continued Mike, "but he's by the little tent, near the pit, right below us. So he has to aim straight up. They're waving now. They want us to come on down."

That was good news. As they worked their way down the cliff, Biff looked up and saw the eagles circling higher, which was encouraging,

too. Occasionally, the birds made short darts toward the cliff. Then, bullets began to sing again and their sound was music to Biff's ears.

Mike had a different sentiment. He expressed it as they neared the bottom of the cliff.

"I'm glad that the shooting is over," said Mike. "Some of those bullets were coming very close. Too close."

Biff was suddenly breathless: "You don't think that Kirby was aiming at us instead of the eagles?"

"I don't know, Biff. But if Kirby is Tizoc, he can't be very anxious to have us tell our story."

"That's for sure, Mike!" Biff agreed.

Mr. Brewster was the first person to reach the boys as they took a short drop to the rubble-strewn ground not far from Bortha's tent. Kirby was still on the other side of the excavation, looking up as though hoping for a last shot at an eagle.

Quickly, eagerly, the boys poured out an account of their trip to Tizoc's cavern beneath the mountain peak, including their discovery of the mysterious boxes that practically filled the adjoining cave. Professor Bortha joined them while they were in the midst of their story, and Mr. Brewster urged them: "Go right on." Then, to Bortha, he said in a low voice, "Keep an eye on Kirby. We don't want him to hear this."

When Biff and Mike had finished, Professor Bortha turned to Mr. Brewster and asked:

"Where did you meet Kirby? And how long ago?"

"I arrived at noon," Biff's father replied, "and after lunch I went down to the village to look for the boys. I ran into Kirby near the Bull's Head-or the Red Bull, as Biff calls it-and we decided the boys might be over here. So we came over. It's lucky your men had those rifles to lend us."

"I've kept them armed against prowlers," said Bortha, "but none of them is a good shot. It was lucky that you came along."

"And Kirby," added Mr. Brewster.

"I'm not so sure," returned Bortha grimly. "He may have been aiming for the boys, not the birds."

"Professor Bortha may be right, Dad," asserted Biff. "Mike thinks the same thing."

Mike nodded. "Some of those shots were mighty close," he admitted.

Mr. Brewster took a quick look across the pile of rubble. Kirby was lowering his rifle, apparently giving up hope of bagging any eagles.

"If Kirby is Tizoc," said Mr. Brewster, "he had plenty of time to get back after the boys were captured. He knows now that we have uncovered his secret headquarters and have learned about those

boxes. What is our next step?"

"Talk to Kirby," suggested Bortha. "Tell him what has happened. Ask his advice. If he is Tizoc, he knows everything already. If he thinks that you do not suspect him, you may be able to make him show his hand, particularly if he becomes bold. If he is not Tizoc, he may be able to help find out the man who is."

By now, Kirby was clambering across the rubble. The big man gave his head a sideward tilt as he looked down into the deep pit that Bortha had excavated below the cliff. Then he turned to Bortha and demanded:

"Say, prof, where were you when the boys went climbing up to rob those eagles' nests? Why didn't you stop them?"

"I was down there." Testily, Bortha pointed into the pit. "So I couldn't have seen them anyway. But they didn't climb up the cliff. They came down from the peak above."

"Why, that's even crazier!"

"Not when you hear their story, Kirby," put in Mr. Brewster. "I'll have them repeat it, just as they told it to me."

Repeat it, Biff and Mike did, while Kirby listened with an amazed look on his moonish face. At moments, he muttered interruptions, such as, "Tizoc! What nonsense!" and "Do you expect me to believe this stuff?"

But when the boys came to the part about the stacks of boxes that had come in by pack trains, Kirby's reddish features turned an outright purple.

Mr. Brewster saw it and inserted a neat query:

"Would you know anything about those boxes, Kirby?"

"No, not a thing," returned Kirby. "Not actually. I can believe this Tizoc business now, however. It explains something that has bothered me."

"Like what?"

"Well, as you know, I've shipped a lot of silver over the mountains, but I couldn't afford to bring in all the mining equipment that I've wanted. So to pay the cost of the return trips, I let my drivers bring back shipments from the railroad that were marked for El Cielo. I thought that some came here to the excavation and that others were for merchants in the village."

"Dr. La Vega and I brought in our equipment," inserted Bortha, "by our own pack trains. I can't speak for the merchants in El Cielo, however."

"I never dreamed that such shipments were being diverted elsewhere," Kirby went on. He removed his big hat and mopped his perspiring forehead. "Maybe that's why people began questioning my mining operations. I'd even been told that you were coming here to

investigate me, Mr. Brewster. That's why--"

Kirby cut off short, as though he'd been about to say too much. Clamping his big hat on his head, he became his usual bluff, important self. A keen look in his eye, he asked:

"Why don't we look into this quietly, on our own? Maybe find out what is in those boxes and get to the bottom of Tizoc's game? Learn who he is and then trap him!"

"That is all right with me," agreed Mr. Brewster. He turned to Bortha. "What about you, professor?"

"I am still an archeologist," replied Bortha in a matter-of-fact tone. "At present my work is here." He gestured to the excavation. "I must admit that the finding of the statue of Huitzilopochtli in its original mountain cave would intrigue me greatly. But the whole thing may be an outright fake. So I would prefer that you check it first. I can discuss it with Dr. La Vega when he is feeling better."

It was dusk now, so Bortha turned on floodlights to resume work at the excavation. Kirby stayed close to Mr. Brewster and the boys as they headed into El Cielo. It was plain that he intended to stay with them until the Tizoc question was settled.

On this one evening, however, Tizoc and his Eagle Knights could have stalked the narrow streets of El Cielo and gone practically unnoticed. The big *fiesta* had begun, and all the villagers were out, wearing the greatest assortment of fanciful masks and costumes that Biff had ever seen. Many of them represented ancient Aztec heroes and other mythical figures, while others were shaped like grotesque animals.

A green-faced cat with broom-straw whiskers blocked Biff's path with a fierce hiss. Then the cat-man unmasked and there was Chaco, wearing a big grin on his usually stolid face. Mr. Brewster asked in surprise: "Aren't you working at the excavation, Chaco?"

"Not tonight, senor. Tonight, I have fun at the *fiesta*. All night, until the dawn."

"At dawn, come up to the Hotel Pico," said Mr. Brewster. "Bring a few good men with you. We will be needing you for something special."

"We shall be there, senor."

Even the banana seller was gone from in front of the Red Bull. But *mariachis* were in abundance, in various types of fancy jackets, denoting different groups of players. But among those unmasked faces, the boys saw none resembling Ramonez.

A few hours later, they went up to the Hotel Pico. Kirby accompanied them, saying he had decided to stay there overnight. The *fiesta* spirit was in evidence at the hotel, too, for after dinner, Biff heard a *mariachi* group playing outdoors, while Mr. Brewster and

Kirby sat in the patio and talked about Tizoc.

It was then that Mr. Brewster turned to Biff and asked: "Where are those torn slips that you and Mike put together? I'd like Mr. Kirby to see them."

"They're in Professor Bortha's room, dad. I'll get them."

As Biff opened the door of Room 8, he stopped short. The room was lighted, and a figure was stooped above the recording machine, sorting through Bortha's notes. But intent though the intruder was, his ear was quick enough to catch the sound of Biff's entry.

The man straightened up with the speed of a striking snake. Biff saw that he was wearing a *mariachi* jacket and that the pattern of its embroidered collar looked quite familiar. That in itself was no surprise, as Biff recognized the face above it.

To Biff's lips sprang the name: "Ramonez!"

CHAPTER XIX

A Fight to the Finish

AS BIFF spoke the name, Ramonez thrust a hand beneath his jacket. Whether he was after a gun or a knife, Biff didn't wait to see. He sprang out to the patio, shouting: "He's here-Ramonez-" Then, turning about again, Biff was just in time to see the door come slamming shut, almost in his face.

Kirby arrived a few seconds later. Yanking his gun from its holster, he rammed open the door and drove in with the same gusto that he had shown the day when Biff was trapped in the closet at the Red Bull.

As on that previous occasion, Kirby arrived too late. The room was empty, its wide open window showing the course that Ramonez had taken. There was no tracing him in the darkness, except from the strumming of distant guitars. Moments later, that sound had faded into the night. Ramonez had rejoined the *mariachi* players, and the entire group was gone.

Mr. Brewster had so far scarcely mentioned Ramonez when discussing the Tizoc situation. Now, he explained who Ramonez was and how suspiciously he had acted.

"Ramonez sounds like Tizoc," exclaimed Kirby. "Those *mariachi* players are probably his Eagle Knights. I wish I had brought some workers up from the mine. We'd handle that bunch!"

The pieces of the torn message were still with Bertha's notes. Biff put them together for Kirby's benefit.

"These slips are what Ramonez was after," declared Kirby. "They are evidence that he was inducing people to join up with the Tizoc racket. Imagine him getting away with it right outside the Red Bull!"

Mike overheard that comment and later made one of his own to Biff.

"It would have been easier for Kirby to plant that banana man outside the Red Bull than it would have been for Ramonez."

"Then you still think that Kirby is Tizoc?"

"I'm still not sure," replied Mike. "Let's call it a toss-up between Kirby and Ramonez."

"And I say, let's call it a day."

To that, Mike agreed, for both he and Biff were dog-tired from their strenuous ordeal. They turned in for the night, leaving it to Mr. Brewster to map out the next day's plans with Kirby.

Biff's dreams were vivid. He fancied himself trapped between a flock of eagles and equally ferocious owls that all had round-rimmed

eyes like Ramonez. Kirby was in the dream, too, banging away with a big gun, while Biff dodged the shots. Next, Biff was falling from a cliff, with Mike swooping down and grabbing him. He woke up to find Mike giving him a shake, with daylight showing in the window.

"It's after dawn," Mike was telling him. "Chaco and his men are here. Grab some breakfast in a hurry. We're going to get started soon!"

Half an hour later, the expedition had reached the lone cactus and was turning off toward the hidden ledge. When they reached it, Mr. Brewster was amazed to see how completely the jutting rim cut off any view from below.

At the entrance to the cave, Biff's father told the boys: "Wait here with Mr. Kirby. I'm going back to post two of Chaco's men as lookouts. I'll bring the rest along."

There were five in Chaco's crew beside himself, which meant that Mr. Brewster would have four faithful, able-bodied followers. But Kirby grew impatient as he waited with the boys.

"Every minute counts right now," the big man insisted. "I'm going in there on my own"-he pulled his *ranchero* hat down over his eyes and planted his hand on his bolstered gun-"so tell Mr. Brewster I couldn't wait. Anywhere I go, I want to be there first."

Kirby strode into the outer cavern, and the boys watched him stalk across it through the patchy sunlight that filtered down through the fissures. Whether he reached the inner cave, they could not tell, for as the gloom swallowed Kirby's burly form, white shapes seemed to flit from the side walls and converge upon the spot where they had last seen Kirby.

Instinctively, Biff and Mike recoiled from the outer entrance, drawing back along the ledge.

"Eagle Knights," gulped Biff. "They've got him."

"Unless it was an act," responded Mike. "Maybe Kirby wants us to think it happened that way. Then he can really trap us."

On one point, they both agreed; namely, that Mr. Brewster ought to know what had happened. They raced back along the ledge and waved frantically as Biff's father came in sight with Chaco and three other chunky, stolid men close behind him.

Before Biff and Mike could give more than the bare details, Mr. Brewster understood all. Kirby's absence was expressive in itself. Biff's father waved for Chaco and the rest to follow him into the cavern. But he threw a last warning to Biff and Mike.

"Stay back," Mr. Brewster told them. "You ran into trouble here before. We'll take care of this."

Biff halted and looked at Mike glumly.

"Dad said to stay back. He meant it."

“But how far back?” asked Mike. “He didn’t say to stay outside, here on the ledge. Or did he?”

“No, he didn’t.”

“So we go in.” Mike gestured to the cavern entrance, where Mr. Brewster and Chaco’s men had already gone. “Then we stay back.”

To that, Biff agreed. “Let’s go.”

Inside, things were happening fast.

As Mr. Brewster neared the inner cavern, four Eagle Knights sprang up to seize him. They were stopped in their tracks by Chaco and his loyal crew, who spread both ways, swinging clubs of their own. Mr. Brewster drove on into the inner cavern.

Biff and Mike were close behind, but remembering the order to “Stay back!” they paused at the inner entrance. There, they witnessed the quick duel that followed. In the center of the domed cavern stood Tizoc, his jeweled mask and golden robe flashing in the glow of the half-hidden lights. In his upraised hand, he gripped his obsidian knife as a challenge to all comers.

As the only challenger, Mr. Brewster didn’t wait. He drove straight in, barehanded, warding off Tizoc’s downward stroke with one arm. Then, with his other fist, he drove a punch to the masked face just as he had done at Judge Arista’s.

Tizoc reeled back as Biff and Mike watched, breathless. Now, for the first time, the boys saw that there were more Eagle Knights, crouched and waiting at the sides of this glowing cave where the stone-lipped idol of Mexitli squatted as if watching from its rocky pedestal.

By his swift, unexpected drive, Mr. Brewster had utterly ruined Tizoc’s plans. If Biff’s father had hesitated at sight of that upraised blade, a quick signal would have brought the Eagle Knights swarming in to seize him. Instead, he had gone straight for Tizoc; now all they could do was watch the grapple.

Mr. Brewster held one advantage. Tizoc’s followers, believing that their masked chief was invincible, would not move unless he waved them in. But if Mr. Brewster made the slightest slip, his last chance would be gone. Tizoc would fling him to the Eagle Knights.

They would swarm upon Mr. Brewster as furiously as the real eagles had swooped down on the boys on the cliff, the day before.

Biff’s father didn’t make a slip. With his left hand, he was gripping Tizoc’s right wrist, trying to wrench away the obsidian knife. His right arm was clamping Tizoc’s left and he was shoving his right fist up against the jeweled mask, hoping to pry it loose from the false Tizoc’s face.

During the struggle, they reeled to the rear of the cave and jolted against the rocky pedestal where the statue of Mexitli was perched.

The squatty Aztec War God looked like a stony-faced referee, awaiting the outcome of a wrestling match in order to declare the winner.

That, perhaps, was what roused Tizoc to a last furious surge. He twisted his knife hand free, but only momentarily, for Mr. Brewster immediately regained his iron grip. But in that instant, Tizoc had gestured with the knife, and the Eagle Knights had accepted the flash of the obsidian blade as a signal for attack. They surged forward.

Biff and Mike were rooted helplessly. Before they could even call a warning, Mr. Brewster saw the approaching menace. He made a last valiant effort to unmask Tizoc, at the same time shouting to the Eagle Knights:

“Stay back, all of you! Stay back until you see who Tizoc really is!”

Ordinarily, the Eagle Knights would not have heeded those words. Their own fierce war cries should have drowned Mr. Brewster’s shout; and they were still taking orders from Tizoc, not from the man who opposed him. But the call came from the very foot of the Mexitli statue, the place where such sounds were magnified!

Mr. Brewster’s words were transformed into a thundering roar, which the Eagle Knights took to be the voice of Mexitli, a figure even more powerful than Tizoc. They halted, as the entire cavern echoed: “Stay back-stay back!”

That was all the time that Mr. Brewster needed. While his shout reverberated from the walls and dome, he ripped away Tizoc’s mask and dragged his sagging opponent to the center of the cavern. There, he delivered a decisive upward punch that jarred the false Tizoc’s jaw and tilted his face into the light.

Biff and Mike, already staring forward to give what help they could, were close enough to see that face quite plainly. They halted and stared in sheer amazement.

Of all the surprises that their adventures had produced, none could quite match this!

CHAPTER XX

The Final Riddle

TIZOC was Professor Mark Bortha!

It seemed incredible that the man who seemingly had so ardently pressed the hunt for Tizoc had been playing that part himself. Yet here was evidence that had to be taken at face value. Evidence in the form of Bortha's own face!

Trouble was not yet over. Bortha snapped suddenly from his daze and tried to brandish his knife, hoping to rally his followers. But the dumfounded Eagle Knights still hesitated, and too long.

They were suddenly rushed from behind, rapidly overwhelmed and sent sprawling to the cavern floor. The attackers who had surprised the Eagle Knights were men in *mariachi* costumes, who had been lurking in the side caverns, awaiting this opportunity. Their leader stepped forward to congratulate Mr. Brewster, who by now had taken away Bortha's knife and had pinioned the robed prisoner's arms behind him.

The leader of the *mariachis* was Jose Ramonez. His manner now was brisk, rather than smooth. Without his glasses, his face had lost its owlish look, and his speech was blunt and decisive, a marked change from his former oily tone.

"It is time I introduced myself in my true capacity," Ramonez told Mr. Brewster. From his *mariachi* jacket, he produced a folding wallet which he opened to display a badge and other credentials. "You knew me only as Judge Arista's secretary. Actually, I am a special investigating agent of the Mexican Federal Government." He gestured to the other men in *mariachi* costumes. "These are my deputies."

Mr. Brewster showed brief astonishment; then suddenly he queried: "How does Justin Kirby figure in all this?"

"More so than he probably knows," rejoined Ramonez, with a slight smile. "Tell me, where is Senor Kirby?"

"That's right! Where is Kirby?"

Mr. Brewster turned to the boys, but before they could reply, a voice spoke from the cavern entrance:

"Here is Senor Kirby."

Chaco was the speaker. He and one of his men were helping Kirby in from the outer cabin. Kirby's *ranchero* hat was gone, his face was grimy and blood streaked, his revolver was missing from its holster. But he managed to give a wry smile as he said weakly:

"I really goofed, barging in the way I did. A bunch of Eagle Knights grabbed me and left me lying in a corner back there." He gestured to

the outer cavern. "That's the last thing I can remember, until Chaco came along and put me back in circulation."

Kirby paused, did a double-take as he saw Bortha in Mr. Brewster's grip. Then he asked incredulously:

"You're not telling me the *professor* is Tizoc!"

"We are," stated Ramonez, "but he was trying to pin that honor on you. Come this way and I'll show you."

He led the group into the cavern where the stacks of boxes were. Biff's father dragged Bortha along with him.

"I was specially delegated to work with Judge Arista," explained Ramonez, "just in case someone would try to steal the lost Aztec treasure, if Dr. La Vega found it. I heard the Tizoc rumors, so I came to El Cielo on one of my so-called vacations and did some investigative work.

"I learned that for months, large shipments of mining equipment and other supplies had been coming in by railroad and then carried by pack train over the mountains and down to Kirby's headquarters at Hacienda Arroyo. But only a small percentage of those shipments reached their destination.

"The rest, amounting to many tons, disappeared before they got as far as El Cielo. Just where, none of the natives would tell, they were all so afraid of Tizoc. We knew that if we pushed the inquiry too rapidly, word would get back to Tizoc. So we took it slowly, keeping special watch on Senor Kirby."

Kirby looked at Ramonez and blinked. "Why me?"

"Because Tizoc was pinning suspicion on you," explained Ramonez. "Those boxes are addressed to you, Kirby. By watching you, we hoped to track things back to Tizoc, whoever he was."

"But Bortha was on the train coming into Mexico City when the boys were attacked in the judge's museum," Mr. Brewster put in. "How could he have been Tizoc then?"

"We learned later that the train was late," replied Ramonez, "although a bulletin at Buenavista Station had announced that it would arrive on time. Bortha stole the Tizoc costume, fled from Judge Arista's wearing it, and made a phone call from nearby, claiming that he had just arrived at the station. But he couldn't have, because his train wasn't in."

Bortha glared angrily as he realized for the first time that his alibi had been punctured.

"We knew then," added Ramonez, "that Professor Bortha must have come in on an earlier train or that he had reached a through highway and come in by car. Of course, you were in Mexico City, too, Kirby."

"That's right," nodded Kirby. "I'd been hearing all sorts of rumors

from the workers who left the excavation to take jobs with me. They talked about a man named Brewster who was due in Mexico City and was coming to El Cielo later. When I heard he was a mining expert, I figured he'd be checking on me. So I went to Mexico City to get a line on him."

"As Bortha planned it," declared Ramonez. "He started those rumors, Kirby. He wanted you to be in Mexico City when he stole the Tizoc costume, so you could be blamed for it."

Biff turned to Kirby and asked:

"Then you really were watching us outside the Hotel Del Monte?"

"I really was," acknowledged Kirby. "I paid the cab driver to pick you up so I could trail you in another cab. I figured you would lead me to where your father was. I wanted to get a look at him."

"But why did the cabby swing over by the Buena-vista Station?"

"I told him to do that," explained Kirby, "so my cab could stay close behind yours, without your knowing that you had been trailed all the way from the hotel. After you reached Judge Arista's, I figured there was no more use. When you were admitted, I simply went away."

Biff pondered; then asked:

"But who made that Tizoc phone call?"

Kirby stared, puzzled, while Ramonez simply shook his head. It was Bortha who spoke up, suddenly.

"I did," he said. Turning his head, Bortha glared at Mr. Brewster. "I wanted to know if you had arrived in Mexico City, so I could plan about going to Arista's museum. I couldn't give my name, so I talked like Tizoc, to throw a scare into anyone who answered."

"Then you planted the crystal skull?"

"Yes, a few hours earlier. I knew that Kirby had been snooping around the Del Monte, so I decided that would be something to pin on Kirby, too."

"Everything gets pinned on me," retorted Kirby, "and the biggest thing of all is this big pile of boxes." He turned to Ramonez. "What's in them, to make them so all-fired important?"

Ramonez turned to his deputies and said:

"Show him."

They opened the boxes, and the boys moved forward to take a look with Kirby. One box was packed with rifles. Another contained machine guns. More boxes were opened, revealing more such weapons.

Ramonez turned and gestured to a still larger stack as he declared:

"Those contain ammunition, actually millions of rounds of it. In that far stack, you will find thousands of hand grenades. Some boxes contain bazookas and other weapons. Enough to equip a small army."

Mr. Brewster spoke, somewhat puzzled:

“What did Bortha want to do? Start a revolution here in El Cielo? Why, he’d be crazy-“

“But he isn’t crazy,” interposed Ramonez, staring steadily at Bortha as he spoke. “He planned, as Tizoc, to make this cavern into an arsenal from which he could ship arms and ammunition to trouble-makers in any Caribbean countries where revolts could be stirred up. It is all part of an international plot, and he is an important member of it. As an archaeologist- which he is-he could turn up in any part of the world without causing comment.”

“But how did he intend to ship the weapons out?”

Before Ramonez could reply, Bortha spoke for himself.

“By plane,” he announced. Then, sneeringly, he went on: “Why do you think I kept telling Dr. La Vega that we needed a landing strip at El Cielo? So I would have it when I really needed it. I knew that time would be running short, sooner or later-“

“And fortunately,” put in Mr. Brewster, “it happened sooner instead of later.”

“That leaves just one thing,” added Ramonez. “How Bortha planned to pay for all these arms. There can only be one answer. He must have found the lost Aztec treasure.”

Bortha’s broad face tightened suddenly with an expression of restrained fury.

“I feel sure you found it, Bortha,” continued Ramonez. “That’s why you engineered that cave-in. You are still hoping that you can get away with some of it. Instead, you are going to turn it over to us-immediately-“

Right then, Bortha made a sudden break. He whipped away from Mr. Brewster’s grasp, drove hard at Kirby, and reeled the big man into Ramonez’ path. With a quick recoil, he darted the other way, reached the corner of the cavern and pressed a hidden switch. A slab pivoted in the wall and in another moment, Bortha would have gone through the opening, locking the door behind him.

But in that moment, Biff and Mike had acted. To them, Bortha’s quick darts were like the shifty tactics of a runner on a football field. They had gone after him and were guessing each twist that he intended. Now, Biff caught Bortha with a low tackle at the knees and Mike landed squarely on his toppling shoulders, flattening him solidly.

The revolving panel closed. Bortha’s attempted escape had failed. Now Ramonez arrived, pressed the switch, and reopened the rocky slab. This time, they all went through, taking Bortha with them. Inside, they found a steep, zigzag stairway, its stone steps, all of ancient origin, leading deep down through the cliff.

By the time they had reached the bottom, they realized they were

below the level of the excavation. There, the stairway opened into a huge, vaulted room, that was utterly fabulous in its glitter. All about were stacks of gold, in the form of plates, bowls, vases, statues, even weapons and suits of armor. All were the work of ancient craftsmen, and some of the decorated bowls and helmets were heaped to the brim with pure gold dust.

Jewels, too, were abundant. There were great mosaics, done in jade and turquoise, priceless in their own right. There were rings, bracelets, even crowns, set with amethysts, opals, and other valuable gems. Biff and Mike looked at each other, recalling the tales that they had heard of Montezuma's treasure and the wealth of other Aztec rulers.

This reality outmatched those fables.

Across the treasure room was a low archway, with a short, steep stairs beyond. At the bottom of these steps, the party reached a shaft of daylight and found themselves at the bottom of the deep pit that Bortha had dug into the rubble, within the fenced enclosure. They clambered up a ladder at the side of the pit and came out near Bortha's tent.

Bortha had gone up the ladder willingly and now, at the top, he gave a shrill cry, waving the arms of the Tizoc robe that he still wore. He was hoping that some of his followers posted there would make a last-moment rescue. But none of those followers was still around.

"I had my men take care of your crew," Ramonez informed Bortha. "You'll find them when we put you in the local calaboose. From the way you moved around, we figured you must have two ways in or out, up or down, wherever you went."

Mr. Brewster was among the last to come up from the pit. Kirby had stayed down there with him, and both had gained a good look at the excavation work.

"It was exactly as I thought," Mr. Brewster told Ramonez. "Bortha had the props fixed for a quick knockout. He wanted to get rid of Dr. La Vega so he could take over the work."

"And it wouldn't be very hard to drop that rubble back into the pit," added Kirby. "Bortha was all fixed to clog it up again, if anyone came close to finding the treasure."

Later, at the Hotel Pico, they found Dr. La Vega well enough to hear the news. Mr. Brewster stressed the finding of the treasure and played down the details of Bortha's treachery. But that latter subject came up again, when Ramonez arrived from El Cielo, where he had left Bortha in the local jail.

It was Biff who asked the question that had been bothering him and Mike:

"Tell us, Senor Ramonez, how could Professor Bortha have been

down under the excavation at the time of the cave-in, while he was dictating his notes on the machine up here?"

Ramonez raised his eyebrows. He turned to Mr. Brewster. "This is the first I've heard about that. How long was Bortha dictating in his room?"

"About two hours," returned Mr. Brewster. "I was at the excavation with the boys. But Mrs. Brewster was here with the twins, and they heard Bortha dictating continually."

"Let's look at that machine."

In Bortha's room, Ramonez started the tape going, and they heard Bortha's voice, plainly recognizable, repeating the Toltec inscriptions and other data from his notes. After a few minutes, Ramonez stopped the machine and said:

"Let's try the other tape."

"That's the only one that's been used," returned Biff.

"But you said that Bortha dictated for two hours," Ramonez reminded him, "and this is only an hour tape."

An idea was dawning on both Biff and Mike. But Ramonez, the experienced investigator, was just ahead of them.

"Allow ten to fifteen minutes from here up to the cavern," he estimated, looking from Bortha's window toward the back path leading to the pack trail. "Five minutes down the stairway in the cliff; five minutes coming up. Another ten to fifteen getting back here. How much is that, all told?"

"Thirty to forty minutes," replied Biff. "Which gave Bortha twenty minutes to chase away Chaco and the excavation workers, when he came there as Tizoc, and also to knock out those props that were all arranged to go. He could have done that job in fifteen minutes." Bortha turned to Mr. Brewster. "Or could he? As an expert, you would know."

"As an expert," smiled Mr. Brewster, "I would say that he could have done it in ten minutes-or even less."

Now, the boys exploded with what they had in mind.

"Then what Bortha did here," began Biff, "was dictate just for an hour, on one tape. Then he started the tape at the beginning and let it play back for another hour--"

"So they could hear his voice through the door," put in Mike, "as though his dictation was still going on. But all during that hour, he was playing the part of Tizoc--"

"And giving himself a perfect alibi," added Mr. Brewster. "There you have it, boys."

The last riddle of the Aztec treasure was solved.

THE END

MYSTERY OF THE MEXICAN TREASURE

By ANDY ADAMS

No. 4 in the Biff Brewster Mystery Adventure series